

RAKXAPHON

Hiroshi Ohnogi

Original Story: BONES / Yutaka Izubuchi

VOLUME 2





#8 \$1.99

RAHXEPHON Volume 2

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RAHXEPHON

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First published in 2002 by Media Factory, Inc. Tokyo, Japan.

English translation rights arranged with Media Factory, Inc.

Publisher

DrMaster Publications, Inc.

4044 Clipper Ct.

Fremont, CA 94538

www.drmasterbooks.com

RAHXEPHON NOVEL VOLUME 2

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First Edition: September 2005

ISBN: 1-59796-001-2

3.95

13+

Ohnogi Hiroshi

Author, Born in 1959, Tokyo.

Made his debut in 1982 as a scriptwriter for *Super Dimensional Fortress Macross*. Other key works include *Gundam Z* and *Magical Play*. Joined the *Rahxephon* staff at the "14th Movement" and was subsequently charged with its novelization.

Yamada Akihiro

Original illustrations and design. Born in 1957, Kochi Prefecture.

Key works include *The Record of the Lodoss War: The Lady of Pharis*, (with Mizuno Ryo, Kadokawa Publications), and *The Twelve Kingdoms* (with Ono Fuyumi, Kodansha X Bunko Publications).

Sano Hirotoshi

Mechanical director. Born in 1962, Fukuoka Prefecture.

Worked as a mechanical director on *Mobile Fighter G Gundam* and *The Vision of Escaflowne*. Often referred to as the "Robot Artist".

Kanno Hiroki

Animation character design. Born in 1965, Iwate Prefecture.

Previous key works include *Cowboy Bebop* and *Hiwou Senki*.

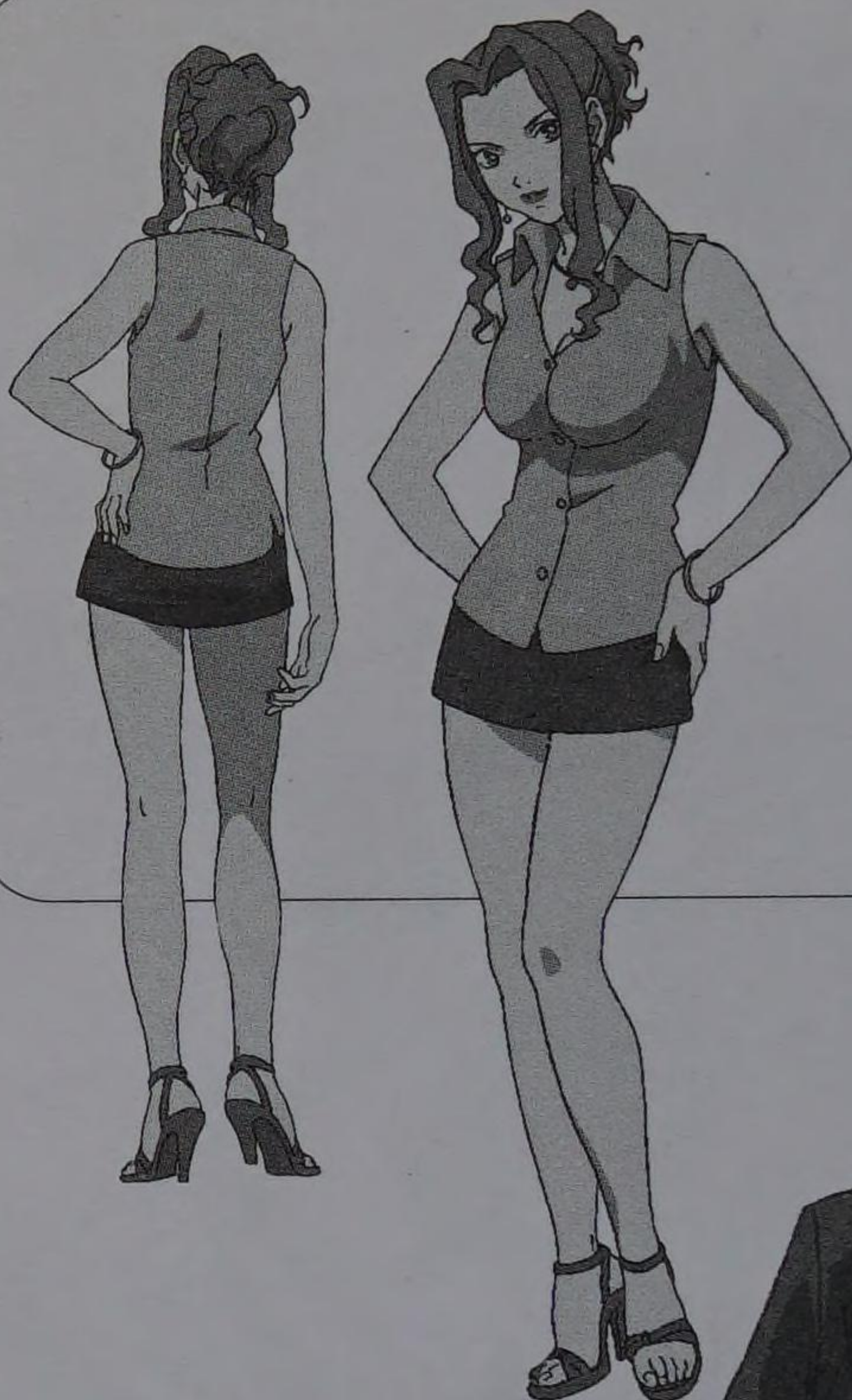
Sato Michiaki

Mechanical design. From Tokyo.

A jack-of-all-trades, Sato has done work as a fine artist, writer, illustrator, book designer, and web designer.

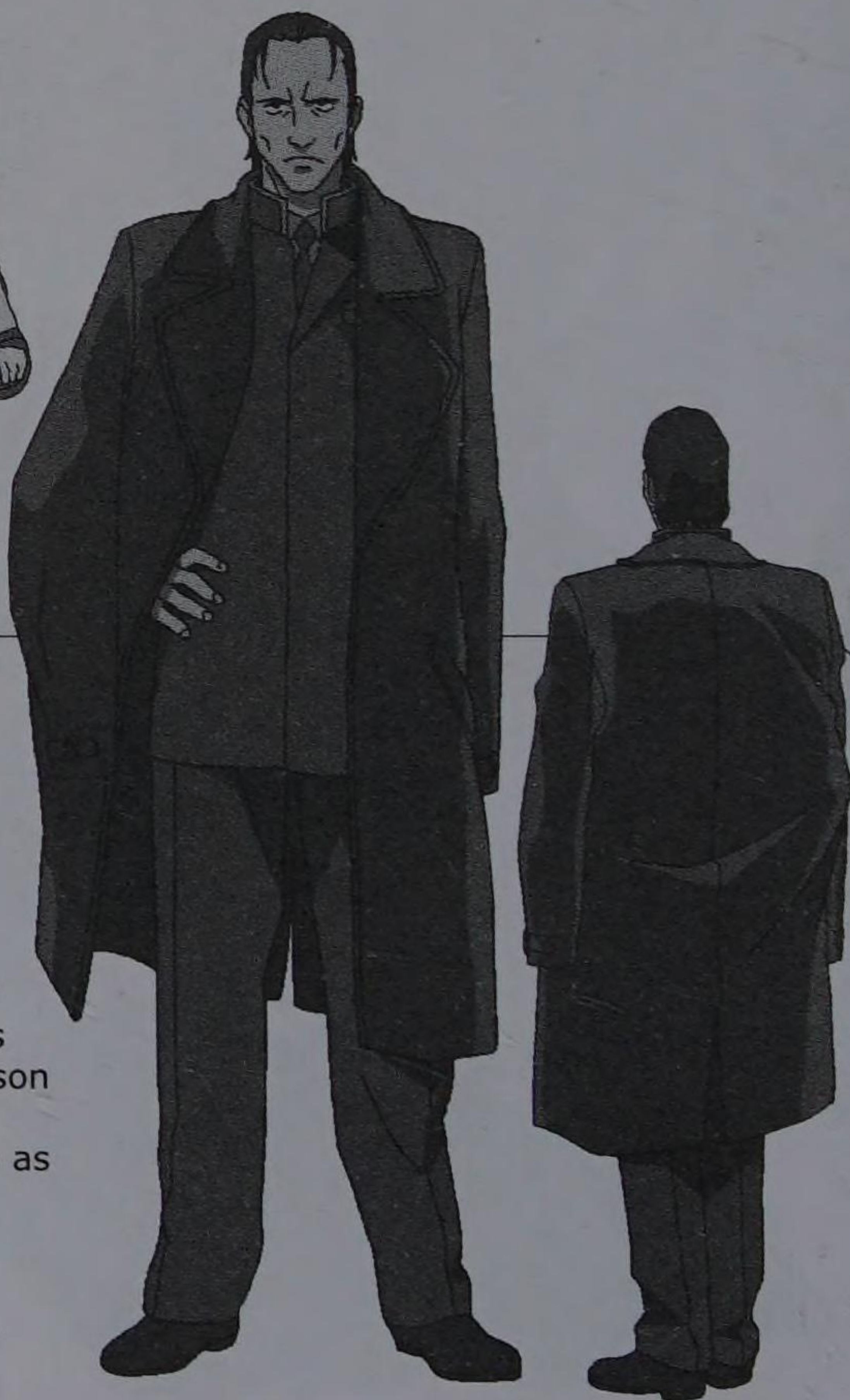






Nanamori Sayoko

Age 28. As an assistant to Kisaragi Itsuki, she conducts research on matters regarding the Mu, such as on D1 Arias. Secretly admires Itsuki, and gets ecstatic when she receives a Christmas present from him.

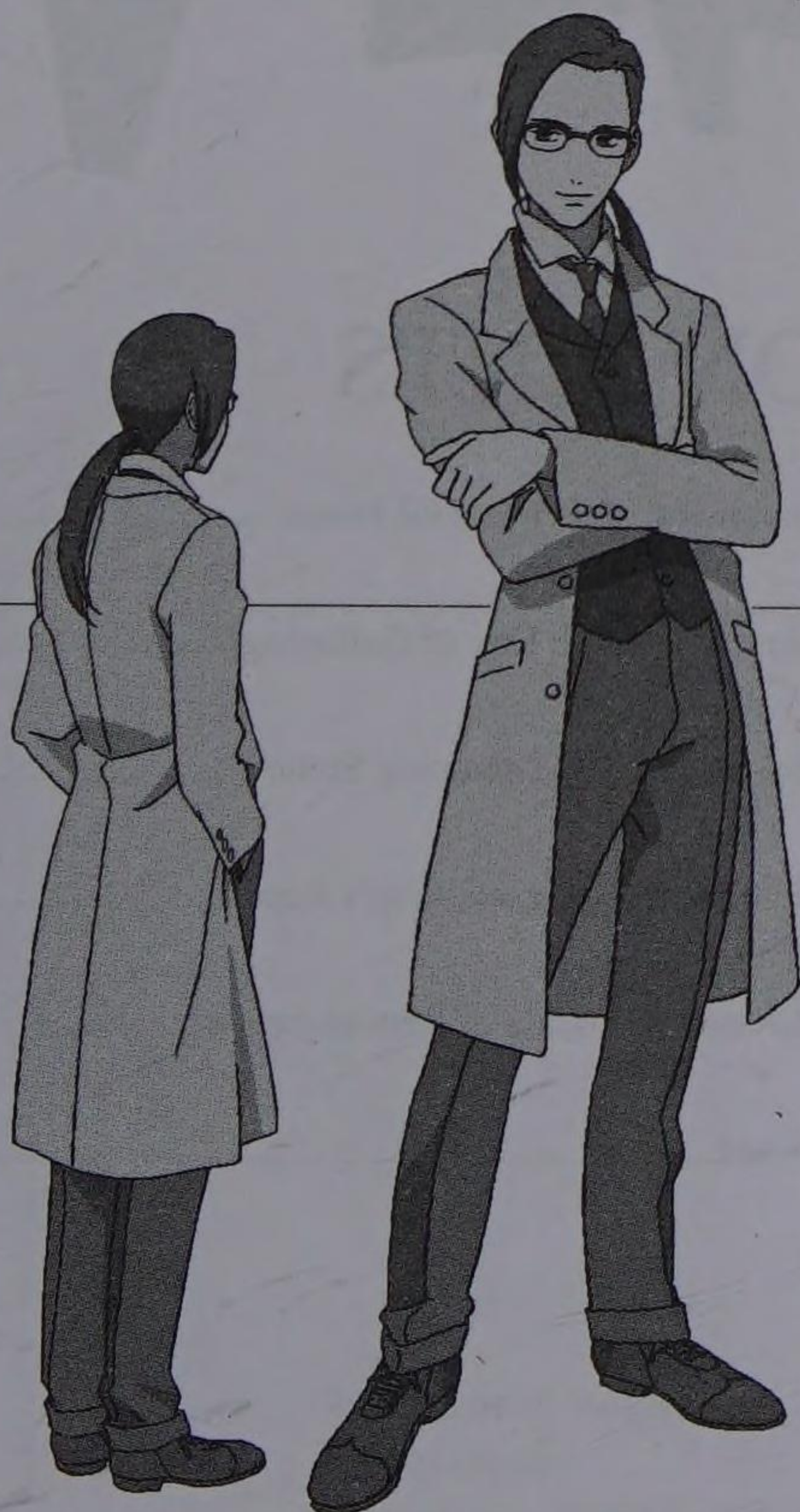
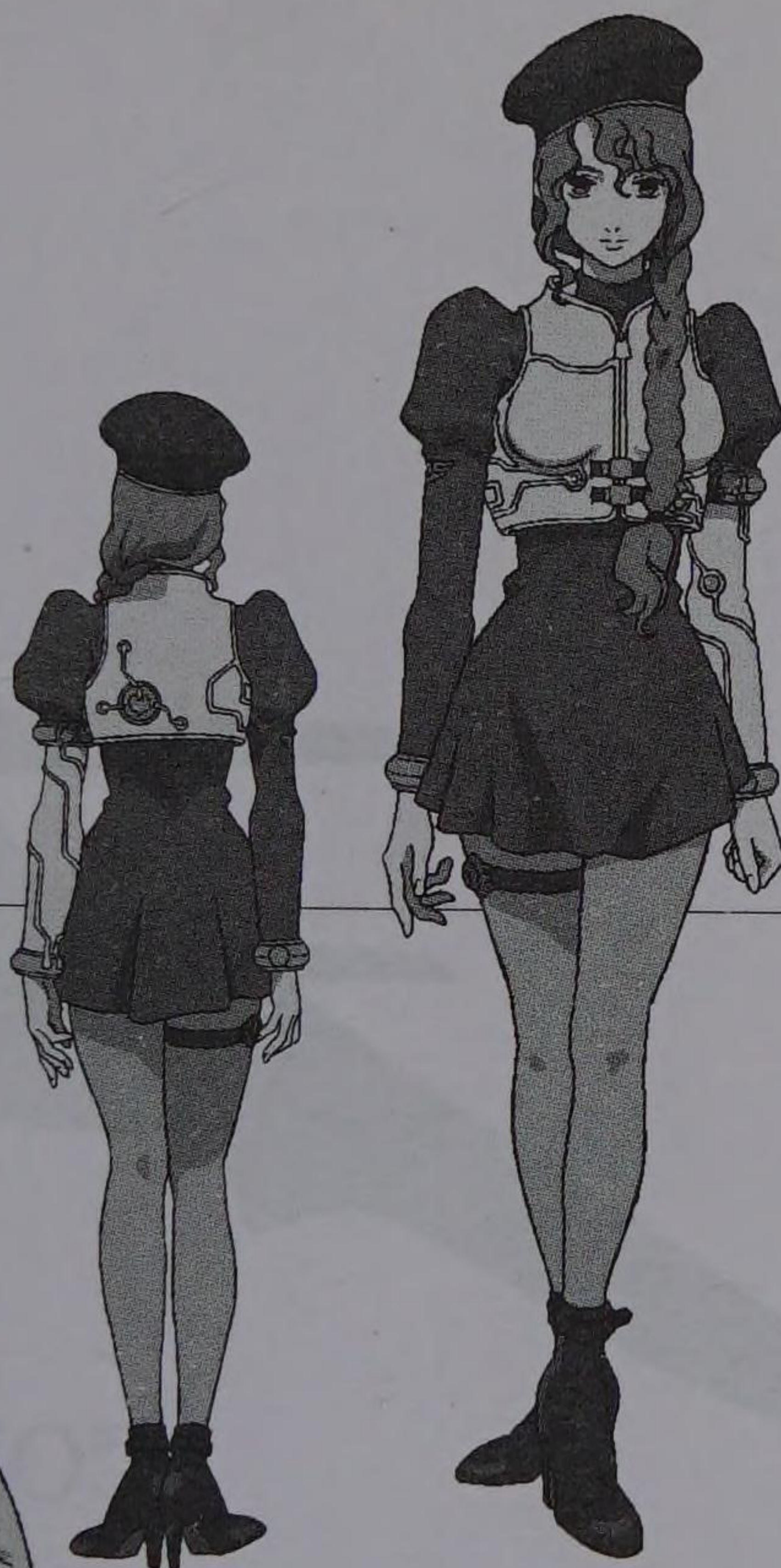


Kunugi Jin

Age 43. Commander of Terra's Tactical Division. In spite of his fierce countenance, he's a person of high repute. In addition to executing battle plans, he acts as an overseer of various affairs along with Director Watari. It seems that he was deeply involved in the Great Mu War...

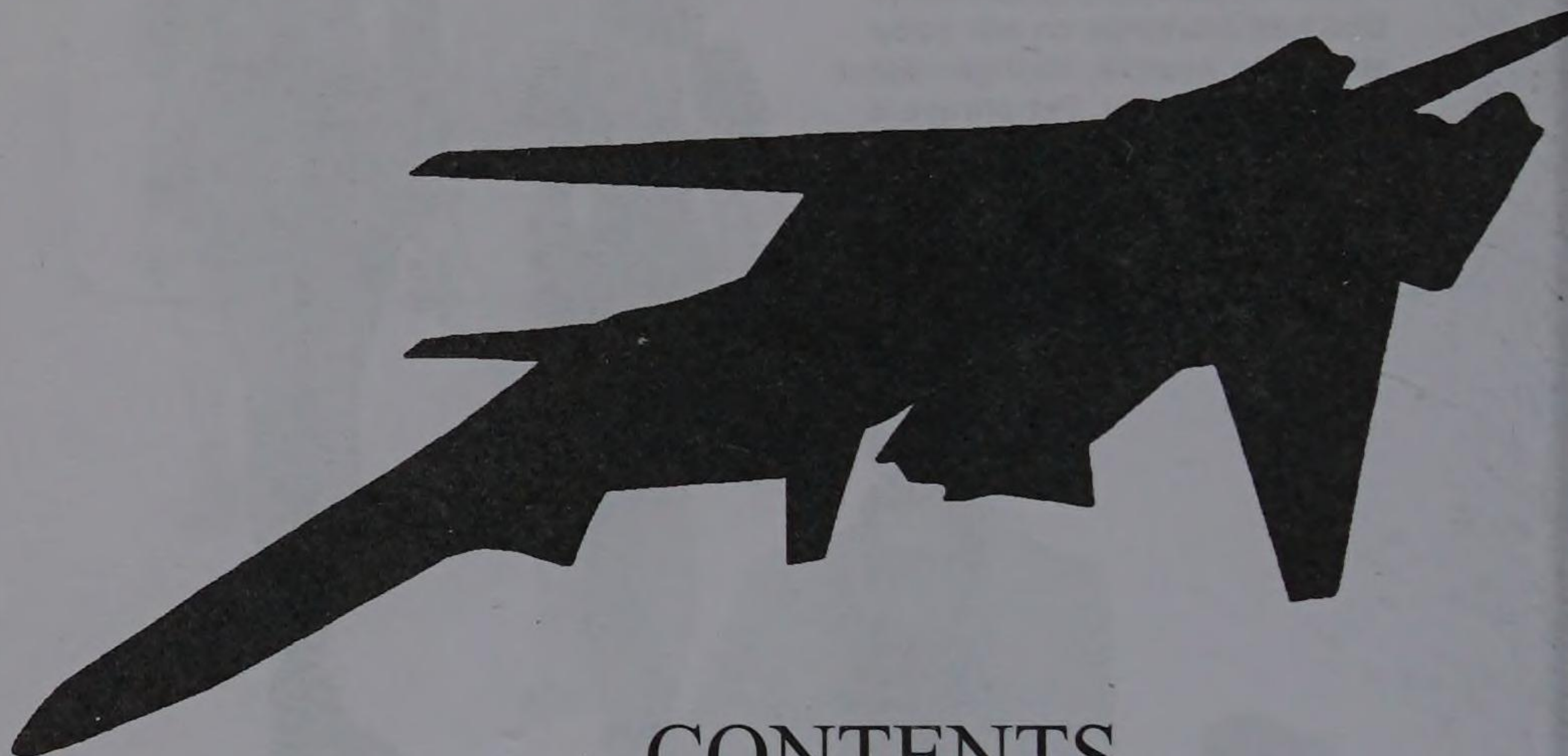
Kisaragi Quon

Age unknown, a girl who comes and goes around Terra. Wears a Life Module on her chest, and is subjected to daily exams by her doctor without being told why. She has markings on her body similar to Ayato's. Younger sister of Kisaragi Itsuki. Pet phrase is "Rara?"



Kisaragi Itsuki

Age 29, Chief scientist of the Terra scientific analysis department. He engages in research of Dolems and the Mu by utilizing his expertise in music. He's an old acquaintance of Inspector Isshiki. Kisaragi Quon's older brother.



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1st Movement: The Fearful Heart

RAHXEPHON Volume 2

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1st Movement: The Peaceful House

1

I opened my eyes to sunlight streaming in through the curtains. Staring up, my eyes alighted on a knot protruding from the wood of the ceiling. As a child, I'd read a passage describing how the base of a branch, cut off and exposed, looked like a strange living thing. At that time, I'd had no idea what they were talking about; the ceiling in my house had just been an ordinary flat board.

As I examined the knot, the words in that passage began to make sense.

The smell of the blanket ... the smell of a home ... it all reminded me of something sweetly familiar.

"You awake?" asked Megumi, flinging open the shoji with a bang.

"Whoa! Wait a sec!" I shouted, alarmed.

She had no idea what happened to men's bodies in the morning, and it wasn't like it was something I could just will away. I tried to get up as quickly as possible, twisting my body away from her to save us both the embarrassment.

I glanced at her and took in her bland expression. She didn't seem to have noticed.

"Breakfast is ready."

"Oh, uh, yeah."

"Do you know where the bathroom is?"

"Yeah."

"OK, then, get dressed," she said as she laid out some clothes for me. It felt strange, having her take care of me like this. Just as I was thinking that, I was startled by her clapping.

"Quickly! Everybody else has been up for a while now."

"OK, OK! I'm moving, go away!"

"Who would want to stay in this smelly room, anyway?"

I winced at the booming sound of the shoji being slammed shut in her wake.

Did she just say my room smelled? So, the room stunk of me already? It still smelled like somebody else's room to me.

I changed clothes. They were exactly the right size. The clothes were new and the material felt stiff, like that unique feeling of fabrics that haven't been broken in yet. It took a bit of work to fasten the clasp on the jeans.

Well, I am a young and healthy male after all.

Out in the main hall, a warm and inviting smell wafted past me. Back at home, the only scent that greeted me in the morning was that of my cold breakfast. But this was the smell of a real breakfast, and just thinking that made me very happy.

On the dining table was a piping-hot spread, and Mr. Rikudoh and Megumi were already in the room.

"Is Ms. Haruka going to join us?"

"She went to work early today."

"Oh, OK. Well, let's dig in!"

I was about to sink my chopsticks into the delicious-looking food when Mr. Rikudoh cleared his throat.

I looked up and saw that Megumi wasn't holding her chopsticks.

Mr. Rikudoh quietly placed his hands together and bowed his head. Megumi did the same thing. Confused, I followed their lead.

"Let us eat, then," said Mr. Rikudoh. Things here were definitely done differently than they way they were at my house. We hardly exchanged words before chowing down on our food.

"I'll take you to Headquarters later," Megumi said, looking at me.

"Headquarters?"

"For Terra."

"Why?" I asked. I mean, really, why should I have to go to Terra?

"So, then, what are you gonna do?" he countered.

What was I going to do? Come to think of it, that was a very good question.

"You don't even have enough money to buy a soda. We're just supposed to take care of you, then?"

I stole a glance at Mr. Rikudoh, but he just flashed me a look that seemed to say "It's none of my business" and continued to eat.

"Well, no, that's not what I was planning," I said.

"Then we're going to Terra Headquarters."

"But aren't they the military?"

"Terra isn't military."

They sure seemed like it. I was pretty certain that normal civilian companies didn't usually keep aircraft carriers lying around.

"After Tokyo was sealed off, the rest of Japan fell apart. Terra was created so that the country could recover. Now that there's a real gov-

ernment, Terra's just a part of the Earth Federation. What happened the other day, that was but one way that Terra helps with Earth Federation PKO activities."

I had no idea what this "help" she spoke about really meant, but it still seemed to be of the military variety to me.

"I ... I'll be taken on as the pilot of the RahXephon, then?"

"Of course. What else would they hire you for?"

"I won't do it," I said mutinously. I didn't want to fight anymore. I especially didn't want to fight the things that came out of Tokyo. I was one of them until just recently, and now I was just supposed to nod, say "yes, sir," and fight blindly?

"Why not?"

She wasn't very perceptive.

"Because I don't want to."

"Oh."

Megumi looked at me, clearly wondering what was wrong.

"Let's go to HQ anyway."

Didn't she get it? I said I wasn't doing it.

"I mean, you can't just laze around all day, playing shogi with my uncle. They can help you with a lot of things at Headquarters."

She was right; I couldn't just do *nothing*. As they say, "If any would not work, neither should they eat."

"Fine," I said, resigned to my fate.

"Then it's decided!" Megumi said with a grin. I couldn't argue with her smile. I hadn't stood a chance from the very beginning.

Section 1: Kim Hotal

The balmy sea breeze brushed past me, carrying with it the ubiquitous scent of the briny sea. My chest tightened in sadness as the ferry silently cut across Nirai Bay. I suddenly heard the sound of raised voices coming from the deck below.

"That's just strange!" I heard a woman shout.

"No, it isn't!" a male voice answered.

I peered down to see what the commotion was all about, and saw Meg and Kamina-kun on the car-loading deck. I shook off lingering traces of melancholy and climbed down to see what was up.

"Does everybody in Tokyo Jupiter do that?" Meg asked.

"We're ordinary Japanese people!" Kamina-kun replied. "It's just that there's a fifteen-year gap there."

"But, still ... putting soy sauce on deep-fried shrimp is totally wrong."

Meg, who did not notice my approach, stood in a familiar pose, arms akimbo, glaring at Kamina-kun.

"Morning, Meg," I said. She seemed startled to see me, and a strange expression crossed her face.

"Kim? What are you doing here?"

I immediately regretted my light, flippant attitude. It was both unusual and suspicious for me to be on the ferry so early in the morning. But I was mature enough to maintain my composure.

"I've got something to do, that's all."

"Oh, really?"

"So," I said, changing the subject, "is he your date?"

"No!" Meg said quickly. A good tactic to avoid questions is to make the other person the center of the discussion.

"Really? See, that's sort of strange. I could have sworn I heard that you two were living together."

"He just lives next door."

"Uh-huh, sure. I wish I had a boyfriend," I said with a grin.

"I said it's not like that!" Meg replied, agitated. She was really easy to toy with. I couldn't keep myself from smiling. I didn't want her to think I was making fun of her, so I turned my gaze to Kamina-kun instead.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Kim Hotal. I work with Megumi." We had met briefly at the Command Center, but I figured a proper introduction was in order.

"Uh, yeah. My name--"

"I know. You're Kamina Ayato-kun, from Tokyo Jupiter. You live next door to Megumi, have a cute face, and on top of that, are the pilot of the RahXephon."

I'd thought I was flattering him, but Kamina-kun seemed a little irritated.

"I'm not a pilot!" he answered harshly. "I'm not going to fight."

What was that about? He could fight the Mu. He was one of the few with the power to do so. What was this garbage about not fighting? How could he possibly say something like that? I wondered if he knew how many people there were in the world that would do *anything* to have this power, people who would give their very lives to get revenge on the Mu.

I knew I would.

I put my hand over my mouth, as if to stop the barrage of words that threatened to spill out. A faint, lingering stench, the pungent odor of daily life, fought its way past my fingers.

I felt like I was going to puke.

Memories of death and thoughts of life collided harshly, until I didn't know what to think anymore. I glared at Kamina-kun. I hated him, just a little, for making me think these things.

2

"I won't."

The look on Mr. Yagumo's face when I said that was absolutely priceless. It was an expression that managed to be simultaneously surprised and troubled.

"Why?"

"Why? Because I don't want to fight."

"I see." Surprisingly, he nodded at that. "Nobody wants to fight. But sometimes we have to."

"But I don't want to, and I sure as hell don't have to!"

Looking for help, Mr. Yagumo glanced toward Mr. Itsuki, who pinned me with his cold stare.

"Then you won't eat, either. Right?" he asked. "So what *can* you do?"

"I can paint."

"An artist, are you?"

I shook my head.

"So, you can't make any money that way, can you? Do you have any other qualifications? And, of course, that means not just out here, but also in Tokyo."

I didn't have any qualifications. I was a typical high-school student who happened to like to paint. I shook my head.

"Not a single one as far as I can see."

The hard edge underlying his usually-gentle voice stabbed at my conscience. I was suddenly hit by a feeling of powerlessness. Whatever energy I'd had moments ago vanished.

I was just a high-school student.... A typical, dime-a-dozen high-school student. I couldn't do anything. I was just a seventeen-year-old kid who aimlessly whiled away his time painting. But it wasn't like I had aspirations to live off of my painting or anything.

But, wait. Since I left Tokyo, I wasn't even a high-school student anymore. Before I'd had everything stripped away from me, I'd never thought of myself as having such a worthless existence.

"So, then, what will you do?" Mr. Itsuki's words reverberated through me and rang in my ears.

"You don't have to fight," he continued. "As a pilot of the RahXephon, you could help collect data. It's important that we analyze the RahXephon's system. Right now, it is the only thing capable of destroying one of the Mu's Dolems. If we could elucidate the fundamental principles behind the RahXephon, then maybe we could combat the Dolems without having to rely on it. And then you wouldn't ever have to fight."

As long as I wouldn't have to fight.... I found myself nodding dumbly.

"Then it's decided," Mr. Itsuki said with a smile.

"Well, then, we shall take on Kamina Ayato-kun as a special employee of Terra," said Mr. Yagumo, relief evident in his voice. He'd finally made me into one of his lapdogs.

"But I'm still an intern, right?" Megumi mumbled from behind me. Mr. Yagumo heard Megumi and drew his attention toward her.

"Megumi-chan, it can't be helped. I mean, there's just no internship program in the research division."

Even though he'd tried, she didn't look satisfied by that. Her expression seemed to say that she didn't so much care about becoming an official employee, but rather that someone recognized her abilities.

"Congratulations!" shouted a loud voice from behind me, accompanied by a heavy pat on my back. I turned and saw the reggae guy and the sullen-faced guy standing there.

"I'm Yomoda Yohei. You can call me Yohei-san," said the reggae guy, extending his hand, which was surprisingly soft.

"Yomoda. How would you write that?"

Yomoda-san burst out laughing. He appeared to be the kind of person who overdid things.

"I get that a lot! If my parents hadn't showed me, I would've never been able to figure out how to write it. You write Yomoda like this," he chuckled as he grabbed a pen and paper.

The kanji for his name was so odd--its literal translation meant Four-Sided Field--that I never would've guessed you'd read it that way. According to him, in older texts the first two characters really did read as Yomo.

Next, sullen-faced guy gave me his hand.

"I'm Gomi Masaru. 'Go' is written with the character for five, and 'Mi' as in 'taste'. Don't write it like 'garbage'." He seemed kind of serious. It wasn't like anyone would actually think his name was garbage or anything.

So there was a Yomoda, and a Gomi, and a Rikudoh. Did all the people on this island have weird names? Well, I guess with a name like Kamina I shouldn't talk.

Thinking that, laughter welled up inside me. Everyone looked at me curiously.

"It's nothing," I choked out. I wasn't as eager as before, but I felt like things might turn out OK.

Section 2: Kunugi Jin

The afterimage of a cluster of flashes all taken at once narrowed my field of vision. A multitude of lenses were directed at us. No matter how many times I attended press conferences, I could never get used to them. I couldn't be dignified like Director Watari, who was sitting placidly next to me.

"How do you respond to the opinions of some within the Earth Federation that Terra should be dissolved?" They started right off with the tough questions. Naturally, it was a question I had anticipated. Director Watari casually parried it aside.

"The fact that some might be of that opinion attests to the health of the organization."

"So you are saying that there were no errors in your research?"

"Our research activity was performed with the utmost caution,

but it's impossible to expect perfection."

"Recently there was incident of a Dolem coming out of Tokyo Jupiter for the first time in over a dozen years. Might this have some relation with Terra's activities?"

This question seemed to get closer to the crux of the situation.

"At the moment, we are carefully examining the possibility of there being a cause-and-effect relationship between the appearance of the Dolem and our activities."

The instant Director Watari made this assertion, the reporters in the meeting hall erupted in a flurry of comments.

"But, even still...."

"If you Terra types weren't at it...."

"There are things people shouldn't mess with...."

"Who will take responsibility?"

The cacophony of voices formed a wave of sound that flooded up toward the high podium at which we stood. Terra must not get involved. If Terra hadn't done anything to spur them on, the Mu would've stayed put forever. A lot of people shared those ideas. But they had no idea about the truth--that humankind had but a limited amount of time remaining.

But we were unable to tell them that. Because if we did....

"And, on top of all of that, is something very strange," declared a voice loud enough for everyone in the vicinity to hear. A man stood. He seemed like a very typical kind of fellow. He had the kind of unassuming, forgettable face that would easily blend in a crowd.

"I'm Futagami of Amato News. An Earth Federation transport arrived in Nirai Island just the other day. Or, should I say, Niraikanai?"

Anyway, it seems the transport came back just as it had left--with an empty cargo hold."

He pinned us with an assessing stare. The plan to transport a Mulian artifact via the Ulysses was an item of highest secrecy. If he possessed this information, it had to mean that this Futagami fellow, with his innocent-looking face, would be a hard man to deal with.

"That is a matter for the Earth Federation. It has nothing to do with us," I said firmly.

Futagami continued, acting as if he hadn't heard my response.

"I wonder what the Earth Federation had originally intended to accomplish. What was so large that they needed a huge transport to retrieve it ... and what was it that prevented them from receiving it?"

His eyes burned with a strange ferocity for a brief second.

"Were they going to pick up Terra's secret weapon?!" he shouted.

Then I made a mistake. I wasn't yet an expert at acting casual. I hadn't expected him to use such a hackneyed, trite expression as "secret weapon", and I flinched just a bit when he said it. He noticed it and was going to press the point further when Director Watari abruptly cut him off with feigned ignorance.

"Really? That's the first I've heard of that. It seems I have a secret weapon now. How reassuring!"

It was a paltry defense, but it got a laugh out of the reporters.

"But, since it is such a secret weapon, I'd rather not be asked about it. Let's end the press conference here, gentlemen." The director stood up and excused himself.

"Wait a second...."

"There's still the matter of finding out who's responsible for all this...."

"People have the right to know...."

Ignoring the reporters' babble, we climbed down from the dais on which the podium rested. I glanced around the meeting hall and saw that, amidst the teeming mayhem of the reporters, Futagami alone watched us with his keen eyes.

"That man is dangerous," I whispered to the director when we were out of earshot.

"You mean Futagami-kun?"

"You know him?" That was a surprise.

"No. But there's something about him that makes me want to call him that."

"Uh, OK...."

"Seems like he came from out of nowhere. He didn't come marching toward us, but he managed to weasel his way into our affairs. Boy, he's a tough cookie." Which meant he would be hard to get rid of. Just pulling ourselves away from Amato News would cause a racket in another news company.

"He may be a troublesome man, but we can use him to our advantage."

Wasn't that a dangerous choice, a real double-edged sword? Something that can injure your enemies, but with the very real possibility of hurting yourself as well. Maybe Director Watari could manage to wield it successfully.

The FH Suit they had left me fit perfectly and was very comfortable since it was made of a flexible elastic material. It even had a pair of matching gloves and boots.

I thought I would look really cool, but my reflection in the changing room's mirror looked odd. These clothes may look cool, but I'd never be able to wear them in every-day life. I struck a pose, then laughed at my reflection.

"You finished?" Ms. Nanamori called from outside the curtain.

"Uh, yeah." If she had seen me fooling around I'd die of embarrassment.

"I'm coming in," she said and opened the curtain. She saw me and smiled.

"It looks good on you."

"Does it?"

"But you have to fasten the clasps around the neck."

"It's a little tight...." I struggled a bit and finally got the clasps closed.

"I'll adjust the size later. You'll have to bear with it for today."

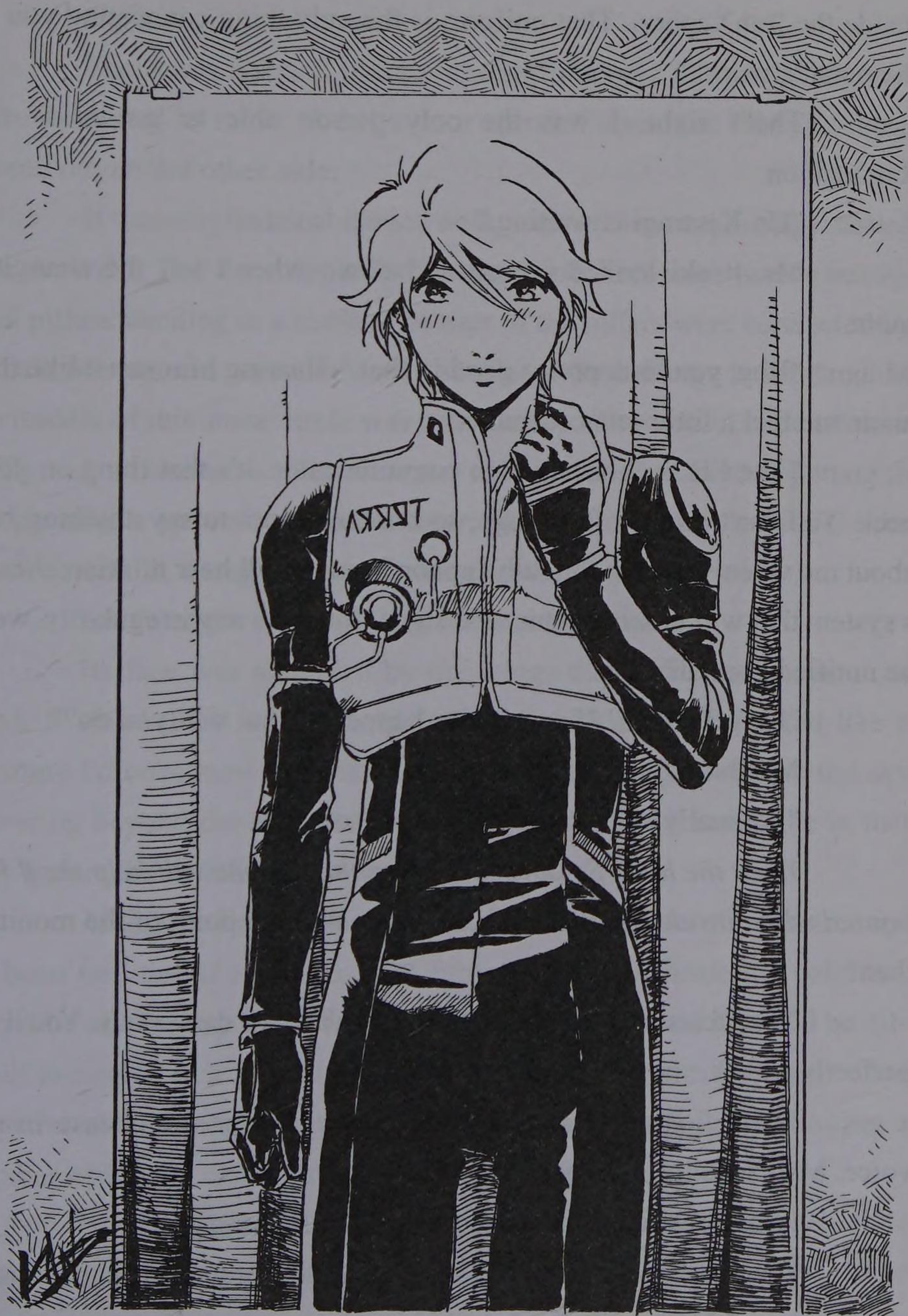
"Yes, ma'am."

"Also, when you put on the FH Suit, make sure to turn on the switch so we can keep you monitored."

"It's this one, right?"

I flipped the switch on the band around my arm to ON.

"Yes, that's it. We need to use this device because we can't see



inside the RahXephon. That uniform is the only thing connecting you to the outside world."

That's right. I was the only person able to go inside the RahXephon.

"Dr. Kisaragi is waiting."

Mr. Itsuki looked me up and down when I left the changing room.

"Hey, you look pretty good in that." Hearing him say it like that made me feel a little self-conscious.

"The FH Suit has a voice communicator. It's that thing on your neck. You can't turn it off, though, so remember not to say anything bad about me when you're in the RahXephon because I'll hear it. Also, there's a system that will monitor your vital signs. If there's any irregularity, we'll be notified immediately."

"Irregularities? If something happens, what will you do?"

Mr. Itsuki just shrugged.

"We really can't do anything. I'm sorry."

What the hell? So does that mean that no one will help me if I'm injured while inside the RahXephon? What was the point of the monitor, then?

"The tests we'll be performing aren't at all dangerous. You'll be perfectly safe."

"I see." It didn't take a psychiatrist to hear the unease in my voice. Ms. Nanamori chimed in.

"You'll be fine. You have to trust Dr. Kisaragi."

"Well, then, I'll bring the forward-examining room to its closest position to the Neriya Barrier."

Gulp.

There was a sound like a crane shifting, and the small room we were in started to move. A large door spiraled open and Neriya Shrine spread out on the other side.

It was a cylindrical domed area, with ancient engravings carved into the walls. The floor rippled with water, and there were twelve hexagonal pillars standing in a circle. The tops of the pillars were connected by a chain of stones in a structure very similar to Stonehenge in England. In the middle of this stone circle was a single column made of water. And it really *was* a column--a pillar of water that stretched from the opening in the pyramid's apex above to the floor, like an infinite waterfall. Unlike most waterfalls, though, it was flowing upward.

Inside of the water pillar stood RahXephon.

Its face was shrouded by the wings that had closed around its head. It stood there with its arms crossed at its chest. It looked like a mummy I'd once seen in a textbook. Above its head I could see the sky wavering beyond the surface of the water. I was told I had come in that way before, but I didn't remember any of it.

Along the line of stones stretched a catwalk for the researchers. I'd been told that if a person went further than that inside the columns, they'd be affected by the power of the Neriya Barrier and it would be difficult to ensure their mental safety. I could see a titanium ring suspended by wires above encircling the waterfall. It was constantly monitoring a number of things, like the rate of the water flowing upward.

However, according to Ms. Nanamori, sensors couldn't penetrate to the center of the waterfall. No substance known to man could. Even titanium or synthetic diamond would be broken down at the atomic level.

It was terrifying.

The RahXephon was standing in the center, completely unaffected.

The examining room slid forward and stopped at the edge of the path that circled the column. It floated before me like a ball from an abacus, this thing they'd called Neriya, Missing Nothing. It looked a lot like an object d'art from inside of Terra HQ. Thinking that, I finally got it. They had copies made from this, the original, to decorate headquarters.

"Let's have you climb aboard the RahXephon, then."

"But," I said, "I don't know how to get inside."

Mr. Itsuki and Ms. Nanamori exchanged glances. What was I supposed to do?

"I mean, every time I got into the RahXephon, I did it without knowing how. So I'm not sure how I get inside."

"You don't need to worry," Mr. Itsuki said with a smile. "You are the one chosen by the RahXephon. If you accept the RahXephon, it will always accept you as well. Believe in yourself."

So, I was supposed to believe in myself? With those words ringing in my ears, I saw that I had no choice. I stepped out onto the path and looked up at the RahXephon. The white, metallic giant stood there, adamant and resolute. Once again I could feel its massive presence.

Had I really operated that thing? Could I really control it? If it would accept me, I suppose I could. Following Mr. Itsuki's instructions, I closed my eyes and tried my hardest to concentrate on what it had felt like when I was in the RahXephon. I tried to reawaken those feelings.

"Deepen your breath," I heard Mr. Itsuki say. "Breathe from your stomach."

From my stomach, right. I breathed in deeply, then exhaled. I breathed in deeply, then exhaled.

No matter how much I tried, it was useless.

Section 3: Yagumo Souichi

"He should be taken to a shelter." Inspector Isshiki's cold remark echoed through the silence. "Or would you have Terra be a volunteer organization, one that takes on incompetent Mulians out of whimsy?"

That was harsh. The Inspector, sitting on a nearby sofa, looked at Dr. Kisaragi with eyes as arctic as his words.

"He is not a Mulian."

"Yet he isn't human."

"The results aren't in yet, so there is no reason to scrap the project."

"So you're saying that would be like the old lady who killed the goose that laid the golden eggs? But, listen, the goose gave golden eggs, right? What has Kamina given us?"

"Nothing. But what have any of us given?"

The Inspector sat with his mouth curled in its usual cold sneer, but his knuckles were white from clenching his fists. Their conversation was a series of icy retorts, but it held such intimacy that I found myself unable to jump in. Dr. Kisaragi had never said anything, but I can tell something had happened between them in the past.

"Then we wait for the results?" asked the Inspector.

"Yes."

"How long must we wait?"

"As long as you can keep patient."

"I am already near the limit of my patience."

"Well, it is we humans that must push the limit."

I had reached *my* limit.

"Um, excuse me for interrupting." Four cold eyes turned my way, but I kept going. "With Commander Kunugi away, I think it might be inadvisable for us to make such an important decision."

"You are Lieutenant-Commander. When Commander Kunugi is away, full authority rests with you."

In other words, the Commander would be held accountable for any decisions I made while he was away because he'd put me in this position. The inspector was a clever man, indeed. I decided to take the humble approach.

"I see. Then we should start making procedures for the transfer of Kamina Ayato to an Earth Federation shelter."

They both seemed a bit surprised at how I had responded.

"I will, of course, need your signature for confirmation, Inspector."

He seemed openly opposed to that. He may talk big, but I knew he didn't want to be held accountable.

"You have to understand, I am not very experienced at this kind of situation. I may be a Lieutenant Commander, but I know I am often taken lightly by the organization. With the Inspector's signature, I imagine the procedures would go a lot more smoothly."

"That's...." While the inspector hesitated, Dr. Kisaragi made a final statement to clinch the deal.

"He's still young. Maybe we should hold off on this until

Commander Kunugi returns."

"I see," said the Inspector. "Then that's what we'll do."

His voice sounded strained. I knew he was just pissed that Dr. Kisaragi and I had forced him to do what we wanted.

"If Kamina hasn't been able to get into the RahXephon by the time the Commander gets back," he continued, "then we'll transfer him to a shelter. Are we agreed?"

"That's fine with me," I answered, seeing a faint smile cross Dr. Kisaragi's lips.

"Then we're finished here," said the Inspector with an air of defeat. He immediately stood up to leave. I could practically feel the tension in the air drain away as he left.

"Have a seat," Dr. Kisaragi said, eyeing the Commander's chair. "You look pretty good in that seat."

"Please, don't tease me like that."

"Well, you have been delegated command."

"OK, really, just stop."

Kisaragi chuckled.

"I wouldn't feel right sitting here. For all that it's worth, I might as well be here to feed his bird, Michiru."

The bird, in its cage near the desk, chirped as if in agreement.

"Commander Kunugi values you highly. I think the mere fact that you're sitting there would be enough to attest to that."

"I want to do my best to live up to his expectations, but I'm just.... I mean, getting the Inspector's signature just now, I really wasn't sure if the procedure would go easily with only my approval."

"You never know until you try."

"So are you saying I should just go for it?"

"It would be *your* responsibility."

The sound of our laughter filled the room. It lightened the atmosphere considerably, but I had to ask something. It was my duty as Lieutenant Commander.

"As for Ayato-kun, how is it *really* going?"

"Well...." Dr. Kisaragi interjected a wealth of meaning into that one word. "He's not opening his heart to the RahXephon. He doesn't understand why he has to operate it. Even though he has piloted it before, the question has arisen as to whether he can ever operate it again."

"But we need him to fight for us. The rest of us aren't capable of destroying the next Dolem."

"It would be easy if Ayato-kun could understand that."

"It's like we've opened Pandora's Box and disaster is about to strike around the world. But if Ayato-kun doesn't fight...."

"RahXephon wasn't built for fighting to begin with," Kisaragi interjected.

"But, still, we have nothing else that can go up against the Mu's power."

Dr. Kisaragi heaved a sigh.

"Whatever the case, it all depends on whether Ayato-kun can, no, whether he will feel up to piloting the RahXephon or not."

4

I arrived home. It wasn't *really* my home, but home was the only word you could use to describe the Rikudoh residence.

"Welcome home!" Mr. Rikudoh said when I walked through the door.

"Thanks."

It was just the kind of conversation you'd expect here.

"Megumi here?" I asked.

"What do you mean, 'Megumi here?'" Mr. Rikudoh said, smiling as he scolded me. "Shouldn't you say, 'Has Megumi come home?'"

Yeah, that's right. But there was such a casual atmosphere here that I felt like I could say anything. I still corrected myself, of course.

"Megumi hasn't returned yet. It looks like Haruka will also be a little late." He began to laugh. "Just now you were thinking, 'What an old coot, all worried about proper manners,' weren't you?"

"No, I wasn't!"

"It's the little things like that are most important."

"Mr. Rikudoh...."

"I told you before, you can call me Uncle."

"Uncle, did you used to teach language arts?"

"The teacher part is right, but not language arts. Come inside now. I'll pour you some coffee."

Coffee began to drip from the coffee maker's siphon in a discordant but peaceful melody. The aroma of coffee spread throughout Uncle's room. In Tokyo, even the best coffee had been freeze-dried, so this coffee smelled different--deeper and richer, with a hint of sweet acidity.

I suddenly thought of the scent of turpentine and Kuma-chan's smile. Come to think of it, Mr. Rikudoh must be about the same age as

him. I wondered if Kuma-chan was putting on a pot of coffee back in the art room right now. I would've liked to let him have some of the coffee they had here.

I wondered how Asahina and Mamoru were doing.

"Something bothering you?" asked Mr. Rikudoh, interrupting my thoughts.

"Uh, no, it's nothing."

"Were you thinking about Tokyo?"

"How could you tell?"

"You don't get to be this old without learning a thing or two," he said with a smile and handed me a thick, heavy mug, which somehow didn't seem at all out of place. I thought of how having coffee served to me in this rough, uneven mug was better than having it served in the finest china. I put some cream and sugar in the coffee, and warmed my hands on the cup as I inhaled its rich aroma once again.

Mr. Rikudoh drank his black coffee in silence. I finally understood why I liked this place. Because it was quiet.

My house in Tokyo was also quiet, but it was the hollow silence of nobody being there. It made my chest ache every day when I came home from school to that relentless silence. But here lay the tranquility of a family. I drank my coffee, relishing that silence, knowing that the silence would bring peace. Even when Tokyo was quiet, there was always some noise, somewhere. The sound of cars, the sound of construction, the sound of a TV. There was none of that here.

It was a warm silence, but it was also a little overwhelming.

"Is this Primabella?" I asked, breaking the tranquility of the moment.

"No, it's Kilimanjaro."

I had consumed Kilimanjaro in Tokyo also.

"But isn't Kilimanjaro more acidic?"

"Acidic?" Mr. Rikudoh said with a laugh. "With coffee, you should say it has a rich bitterness. I roasted the Kilimanjaro so the bitterness would come out well. It tastes pretty good, doesn't it?"

So that's what you looked for in coffee. Maybe it was because of the coffee, and because I felt closer to Mr. Rikudoh, but my worries began to pour out.

"Do you know what the RahXephon is?"

He raised his eyebrows at me.

"Ixtli In Yolteotl...." he murmured.

"Huh?"

"Oh, it's nothing. You mean that robot I saw enter the Neriya Shrine?"

"I was piloting it then."

"I see," he said with a nod, completely unperturbed. I'd been counting on him being just a bit surprised.

"But I can't seem to pilot it anymore."

"I see."

"Before, I'd just appeared in it without knowing how. But when I want to, I can't...."

"I see."

Mr. Rikudoh took a big gulp of coffee.

"Do you play shogi?" he asked.

Shogi? How random.

"No."

"I see. That's OK. If that's the case, then don't worry about what I'm about to say. In shogi, you can really tell the difference in people's abilities. If your opponent is better than you, while you're advancing your pieces, they are suddenly in your territory, and you end up fighting on the defensive from then on."

I had no idea what was he talking about now.

"No matter how much you try to attack, you just can't go on the offensive. But every once in a while you can just barely slide your way into their territory. Those times occur when you're not bent on anything, when you're not trying to win or even attack. I imagine piloting the RahXephon is kind of like that."

"Is it like that?"

"Probably."

Uncle took another sip from his cup.

I think I kinda got what he was talking about. If I tried to get into the RahXephon, then I wouldn't be able to. So then how was I supposed to do it, then?

"You should be able to stay on this island, then?" he asked.

"Yeah, I guess."

"Good. I was worried about you being forced to leave. If it does look like you aren't able to pilot the RahXephon, then come to me. I'll try to help. There's only so much an old retired guy can do, though."

I felt a warmth in my chest. Someone who really was concerned about me was right here. Just thinking of that made me happy.

Section 4: Shitow Haruka

Oh, goodness.

Climbing the hill back home was tough after a long day of work. I glanced at my watch. It was just past eleven. *Everyone will be asleep*, I thought, but when I reached the house, I saw that the light on the second floor was on. Ayato-kun was still awake. I felt like such an idiot, that I was so easily affected by that. Still, it made my climb a little easier.

As soon as I arrived, I quietly went up to the second floor, and called out from in front of the shoji.

"Are you awake?"

"Yeah."

"Can I come in?"

"Sure."

I opened the door and a strange odor wafted past me. It was the musky smell of youth. Ayato-kun was at his desk, busy with something. He must have put it away in a hurry when I came in, but I could see a tiny bit of a half-finished drawing under his notebook.

"Aren't you sleepy?"

"Well, yeah," he said, a troubled expression on his face. "You've already heard, I'm sure."

"Yes, but don't worry about it. So you couldn't pilot it ... you're still *you*, right?" I said. He smiled and gave the peace sign. Without knowing what he meant, I gave him the peace sign back and he snickered.

"No, it's not like that. I wasn't making a peace sign; it meant you're number two."

"What do you mean, number two?"

"You're the second person who'll forgive me even if I can't pilot it."

"I can guess who the first was. My uncle, right?"

Ayato-kun nodded. Uncle would always be there for someone like that.

"Did you draw something?"

"Um, yeah," he said with an embarrassed look on his face. He saw me glance at his half-finished picture and he slid it further underneath the notebook.

"You know, a long time ago, I tried to do a little painting."

"I'd love to see your work sometime, Ms. Haruka."

"That's too bad. When I moved in here, I threw them all away." It was an old memory from my youth. "I know it's just me saying it, but I wasn't very good. Maybe because I didn't have the right motives to paint. Someone I liked was in the art club, so I thought I'd try it out. I just wanted him to acknowledge me. I was just a kid, then."

I glanced at Ayato-kun. His expression was one of hurt, like he was hearing that for the first time.

"You wanted him to acknowledge...." he started to say, then sat still, thinking about it for a while. "I think I'll try the same thing."

"Hmm?"

"Like you did, Ms. Haruka. I'll try to operate the RahXephon so everyone will acknowledge me. And maybe they'll understand me, not just as a pilot, but as the person I truly am."

I had been like that with my painting. Because I'd wanted that person to acknowledge me, and because I'd wanted him to understand me

for who I was. I understood what Ayato-kun meant, but at the same time it also made me ashamed. It felt like I'd just said all that to lead him into making that decision, but I hadn't intended it that way.

"But, really, even if you never pilot it, I acknowledge the person you are."

"Thanks. I'm happy to hear you say that," Ayato-kun said with a smile. His heartfelt expression made me feel better, even if just a little.

5

I stood in front of the RahXephon again.

A pure white giant; its wings concealed its face from human sight. It remained unmoving, as if it were a dead thing suspended at the center of the pillar of water.

I was going to pilot it so that everyone would acknowledge me.

But what if I couldn't? No, I couldn't let myself think like that. It was like Uncle said--that I shouldn't think about it so hard and just do it.

I closed my eyes and took deep breaths. I tried to calm my racing heart and think about what it had felt like the last time I'd ridden in the RahXephon. What had happened then? What was going on? Was someone else there?

"Breathe deeper," said Mr. Itsuki, and I tried to breathe even more deeply.

Suddenly the image of Mishima appeared in the back of my mind. Mishima, smiling and wearing a yellow dress. Yeah, she had been there. I wasn't sure why, but I knew she had been there. I'd held her hand.

Painting the picture of Mishima in my mind, I looked upward and stretched out my hand. The Mishima I imagined smiled and held out her hand to me. Our hands touched. Though I knew I was reaching out toward empty air, I felt the girl's soft hand in mine. Just as I thought that, I realized I was already in the RahXephon.

"You did it," I heard Ms. Nanamori say, her voice strangely distant. Oh, yeah, it was the FH Suit's communications system.

I looked around the Instrumentalist's Seat. Just like before, I couldn't tell how big the space was around it. Something this big shouldn't even fit inside the RahXephon, but somehow it did. Maybe it was best to say that space unfolded inside of the white giant.

And then there was the water. I couldn't tell how deep it went. I thought the Instrumentalist's Seat had protruded out of the water, but leaning out of the chair I couldn't see how far down it went. The water was as clear as glass, but the light didn't even reach the bottom. Next time I'd have to bring in some coins to toss them down. I mean, I'm Japanese after all; whenever we see a body of water we have to toss in some coins. At Disneyland, you can spot Japanese people throwing coins down to the bottom of the water-supply tub for Big Thunder Mountain.

Anyway, enough with the tangent. Where was I?

The Instrumentalist's Chair was more comfortable than any chair I'd ever been in. It fit my body perfectly, like it had been custom made for me. Then, sticking out in the front was something I guess one could call a control stick. Don't ask me how it was operated, because I really had no idea. I just used it instinctively, like riding a bicycle. You know, like if it's leaning over to the right you don't think about turning the handlebar to the left or anything--you just do it. When you turn a corner, for example, you

don't concentrate on your timing to turn perfectly, your body just reacts to it naturally. You do it all without thinking. It was like that.

I don't know why I knew, but I wondered how I did. While I was lost in thought, I realized Mr. Itsuki was saying something.

"How is it, Ayato-kun? It's not too cramped, I hope. If something feels even a little bit unusual, let me know. But remember, we won't be going easy on you just because this is training--otherwise you'll be done for in a real battle."

A real battle ... that stuck with me.

"I got it."

"Keep in mind that you're just helping out with a test. You don't want to fight ... right?"

"Yes, that's right."

"I'm a pacifist, too, so I hear you loud and clear. Well, shall we start the test?"

Section 5: Kisaragi Itsuki

"If he found out the truth he'd be enraged," Ms. Nanamori said. She sat lazily resting her head in her hands. "In that suit he's just like a guinea pig with electrodes on it."

Saying he looked like a guinea pig with electrodes on it was going a little too far. The FH Suit was only on him to transmit data, that's all.

"We haven't told him any lies. He doesn't ask, so we don't need to."

"So, I can tell him, then?" she asked, testing me. She was trying

to rile me with her little games.

"You won't tell him," I said, calling her bluff.

"Why not?"

"Knowing the truth and being happy are often two different things. You should know that by now."

"You're mean."

Yes, I'm mean. Even though I knew why she would say something like that, the fact remained that I was still taking advantage of her. Only an adult would be capable of doing that.

I mean, even with Ayato....

Section 6: Kim Hotal

I ran into Ayato inside the Town Liner. He appeared to be on his way to go shopping in Kanai City.

"You were able to get inside the RahXephon?"

"Yeah."

So he'd been able to change a part of himself, then.

"So we're safe if a Dolem attacks."

"How is that? I won't fight."

I felt a hard pit form inside my chest. How could he say something like that at a time like this?

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want to."

"You're very arrogant," I spat. He seemed surprised.

"You have the power, why won't you use it? It's like a rich guy not willing to give food to a starving child."

"That's kinda screwy logic."

"That's right, it *is* screwed up!" I couldn't hold myself back. The feelings I had been suppressing exploded outward. "But it's the same thing. It's you that's screwed up if you don't understand. Why won't you fight?"

"I don't want to. I hate fighting."

"So you can just divide everything into what you like and don't like, even if others might get hurt? What a child."

"I don't care if it's childish," he said, trying to stand up for himself. "I absolutely won't fight. I'm a pacifist."

"Pacifist? You mean you're a loser. If I were you, I would fight. Even if someone I loved tried to stop me."

My harsh words struck out and sliced into him, but I didn't care if I hurt him or if he hated me. He should know that there were tens, no, hundreds of millions of people who felt the same way I did.

"Why do you want so badly for me to fight?"

The lump in my chest grew bigger and bigger. How long was this kid gonna keep acting like a baby? Just as I was about to unleash all of my anger upon him, the Town Liner arrived at the station. It wasn't my stop, but I jumped off. I knew that if I didn't, I would have decked him.

Were all people from Tokyo like that? He must not realize how much trauma had been inflicted on humankind because of the Mu war. It must be like Dr. Kisaragi had said, that they had all had their memories altered.

"I'm home."

I knew there wouldn't be a reply, but for some reason I always

said that when I came home. It was hard to get out of the habit of checking to see if my sister Che was there yet.

Che was the only one in my family who was always nice to me. It used to matter a lot to me whether or not she was there when I got home.

I took a shower, and under the hot water I felt the hard lump in my chest soften some. Maybe I'd said too much. I'd called him a child, but I'd acted pretty childish myself.

After the shower, I put on my bathrobe, then sat on the edge of my unmade bed and grabbed a small wooden music box from my nightstand.

Opening the lid, I heard the melody begin. After that day I'd lost a lot. I'd lost my precious dolls, books, photo albums, everything. But no matter what happened, I would never give up this music box.

There was a picture of my parents underneath the lid. Through this picture, my parents would always be smiling at me. Beneath the picture was a note my mother had written in Korean. She'd had beautiful, feminine handwriting.

Happy birthday. I'm bringing home lots of presents, so be a good girl.

I had been a good girl, and much time had passed since then.

She never came home.

My mother lied to me....

As had happened so many times before, tears fell on my hands as I clutched the music box to my chest.

6

When I got home, I asked Megumi why Ms. Kim had acted the way she had.

"It doesn't surprise me," Megumi managed to say while simultaneously munching on a Pocky chocolate stick.

"It doesn't?"

"No. The Great Mu War was really terrible."

"Two billion people died, right?"

"It's easy to say it like that, but anyone who was alive then didn't lose a mere number. They lost parents, children, and friends. Do you get it?"

Suddenly, that hard-to-grasp number seemed to gain substance.

"I know I talk about it casually, too, because I was too young to remember. But it's a huge thing for people who do remember. Even now there are tons of people who can't sleep in the dark or have nightmares all the time. I've heard that the only thing we have more of after the war are orphans and psychiatrists. Even in Japan there are still some ruins left by the Great War. There are tons of Great Mu War memorial halls and mass services. No one's fully recovered from their scars. Kim is old enough to remember, not to mention that she lost her parents during the war."

"Oh, I see."

"I don't know much about what happened, but I heard her parents left her with some relatives and went to Australia. I think they were on a business trip or something."

"That's when the Mu attacked."

"Yeah. The rest is history. She had a hard time after that, being passed around from relative to relative, but she's never really told me everything. It must've been so tough for her that she still can't talk about it much."

Megumi stood up, but didn't look at me.

"I'm like her, too. But, then, I still had my mother and sister, and the people in my family are all nice, so I can't really compare my situation to hers. I think Kim joined Terra to get revenge for her parents, or maybe just to have a focus for her anger."

Megumi turned her back to me and, even from behind, she seemed very sad.

"And it's not just Kim. Everyone in the world feels the same way."

Her words hammered mercilessly into my conscience.

The whole world was full of people who wanted to satisfy their own grudge against the Mu. For hatred over murdered parents, the pain of lost children, and the anger over lost friends. The RahXephon was capable of destroying the bringer of that sadness, the Dolem, with a single blow. The fact that I could operate it but wouldn't fight, that I alone could but wouldn't take out the Dolem--maybe it was arrogance.

But for me, Tokyo, the Mu world, was my home.

When I was growing up, I had even thought, *It's the Civil Defense Weapon!* when I would see a Dolem in Tokyo.

How could I bridge that gap?

More importantly, what if the Dolem were just coming to try to bring me back?

Section 7: Torigai Mamoru

"Hey!" I heard someone shout, breaking me out of my reverie.

"Hiroko! What are you doing, surprising me like that?" I asked.

"Surprising you? I've been trying to get your attention for a while. You were totally spaced out."

"I was just thinking about some things. So, what's up?"

"Do you remember the time before the War of Invasion?"

"Why ask that all of a sudden?"

"What I mean is, the day Ayato-kun disappeared the invaders attacked Tokyo, right?"

"Yeah, that was the day when I was the big hero, and saved you...."

Smack!

"Cut it out!" she said. *This is good. I need to be the silly and cheerful Mamoru.*

"That day, on the train, a woman came up to us, you know? She spoke to me, said my name."

"Didn't you mention this to me before?" I said, feigning ignorance. I doubted she'd fall for it much longer.

"After that, sometimes I try to remember her, where we could've met. She even called me Ms. Asahina, like she was younger than me. It was so odd, so I keep trying to think back, but most of the stuff from before the war isn't very clear in my mind."

"You know what they call that, right? I mean, they said it a lot on TV, you know? Uh, what was it now...."

"Worldwide amnesia?"

"Yeah, that's it. When people go through something really traumatic, they sometimes forget about it on a subconscious level. They said something about how humans are forward-looking creatures, or whatever. I don't get all the mumbo-jumbo, but what they're really saying is not to worry about the past and look ahead to the future, right?"

"Is there a future?"

I was shocked by her response. I mean, I'd been trying to play the idiot and keep everything light, but she had to get all serious on me.

"Is there a future in just staying inside the Defense Barrier? We can't get out of here, and with no future or past, we're just supposed to live in the present? How does that make sense?"

This is not good. Especially if an intelligent person like Asahina's starting to think like this. Since the Xephon was gone, there had to be some System-level problems.

"But is that really OK?" she asked, her eyes pleading with me.

"I'm not that bright, so I try not to think about all the details like that."

Thankfully, our teacher came in before I had to say anything else. Good timing. I'd never been so happy to start a lesson. *After class ends, I'm gonna play some basketball and pretend to be all caught up in it. I just have to maintain the front of the idiotic Mamoru.*

On the way home that day, I stopped by the Tokyo Bay Base.

"Oh, Torigai-kun, how unusual. I almost never see you," Maya said, playfully calling me by the name I went by there.

"Stop that."

"Why? You are my Ayato's friend, right?"

"With Ayato gone, why do I have to keep up the friend routine?"

"If you don't want to, you can quit. You're continuing it on your own."

At any rate, since my role as a servant had become unnecessary for official purposes--or at least for Maya's purposes--my new role was as an observer and analyst of people's thought processes. I did this by immersing myself in the daily routine of human life in Tokyo. I hadn't given her my actual reasons behind staying in Tokyo. Knowing her, though, I'm sure she had some idea.

"I have a concern. I've noticed someone trying to talk about things before the War of Invasion. Is something wrong with the System?"

Maya's expression turned dark.

"The Dahlkow System is now turning in the Air Circuit, so we predicted some flaws would arise."

"But isn't that bad?"

"Yes. I'll strengthen Yo Meseta Pukay."

"You won't stop the Air Circuit, right? Even if that puts a huge load on the System?"

Maya gave me a look that said "Of course not."

"We're just about to launch a Dolem. Do you want to come and watch how my son has grown?"

What was she doing still calling him her son? Don't make me laugh. He was just a replacement for her own failure. But I guess I'd have to go with her or she'd be angry later.

Glancing around, I saw Miwa looking at us with a frightened expression on her face. She was obviously surprised at how casually I

spoke to Maya. Miwa had eyes like a rabbit, and I found it making me want to be cruel.

"Shinobu-chan," I said, and walked over to her. I put a hand on her shoulder, and instantly felt her tense up.

"Y ... yes?"

"I'd like to watch everything from here. Take care of the monitor for me, please. Afterward, would you like to go with me to the hotel?"

To my displeasure, she hesitated, so I applied extra pressure on her shoulder.

"Wouldn't that be nice?"

"...Yes."

Maya was looking at me with the same wary expression one would aim at a stray cat or dog. I didn't like being looked at like that by somebody like her, a person who would do anything to find someone to do what she should have been able to accomplish herself.

"Well, let's see it. The great Ayato-kun's show is starting."

7

A phone was ringing somewhere in my room. I was puzzled for a second, but then I remembered they'd given me a cell phone. I still wasn't used to it. I mean, it was hard to even find the TALK button on it. After fumbling with it for a bit, I managed to answer it.

"Hello?"

"Ayato-kun?" came the harsh sound of Ms. Kim's voice. Was it time for another lecture? "A Dolem has appeared."

My heart skipped a beat. What I'd feared most was happening. I

had hoped that they wouldn't come. For Kim and everyone else, it was the object of their hatred, but for me it was something from home, possibly an expression of my mom's desire to take me back.

Would I fight?

I couldn't.

Would I run away?

I couldn't.

So ... what would I do?

"Ayato-kun? Are you still there?"

"Yeah," I answered at last.

"It appeared in Matsumoto. If you don't hurry, the damage will spread."

A cold, sharp sensation swept through my mind.

Matsumoto? So it wasn't here to get me. I guess I was the only one who had even worried about that. It was almost laughable. It'd been a silly and egotistical thing to worry about.

"So, you aren't going to fight, are you?"

"No, I will."

Ms. Kim said something in a happy voice, but the words didn't even register. I was going to fight ... to battle with my homeland.

No, that wasn't it. It wasn't my homeland ... it was Mu. I was going to fight the Mulians.

Section 8: Kunugi Jin

As we were walking down a hall lined with various displays, a call came in on my cell phone.

"Director Watari," I said. "The RahXephon has destroyed the Dolem that appeared over Matsumoto."

I thought I'd said it quietly, but Lord Babhem, who walked almost ten meters ahead of us, halted and turned around.

"The Dolem are just imitations," he said disdainfully.

Ernst von Babhem. It was said that one of his ancestors, who participated in the Crusade to reclaim Jerusalem, found the Holy Grail in a well near the ruins of the Shrine of King Solomon and drank from the cup. He was the head of a clan that was said to possess the secrets of immortality, passed down through the generations.

"It's presumptuous to use such terms as the Instrumentalist's Altar, or even Instrumentalist in the first place," he said. He faced forward and proceeded with the two of us following behind him.

There before us, in one of the displays, was a huge stone slab. It was called the Palenke Slab, but it had not been discovered on Palenke. It was from somewhere on this island, somewhere it shouldn't have been. It was an OOPArt, an Out-of-Place Artifact.

"Forty years," he mumbled as he looked up at it in awe. "It's taken forty long years to make this a reality."

"We might just be in time," the Director said slowly, carefully choosing his words.

"We should be able to prepare the planned number beforehand."

"Will the military be willing to leave everything to us?"

"That was my intention."

I felt a lingering sense of unease. This was dangerous talk. These two were clearly using each other. Anything the Foundation could supply us with carried a price, like the danger of us being carved open from the

inside at any moment. Director Watari thought he could use even Lord Babhem just the way he wanted. But he was forgetting, this man was a Babhem. He was a modern Mephistopheles--he could grant you almost anything, but at the price of your soul.

That man glanced at me.

"You? It's been a long time, hasn't it?"

"Yes, sir. Glad to see you are well."

I kept my comments to a safe minimum. He seemed to lose interest in me, so I hoped that meant he thought I was a nobody.

"How did the meeting go?" asked Lord Babhem.

"I was able to convince the Earth Federation of Terra's need, in the current state of caution, to maintain the RahXephon's military readiness."

"A necessary connivance, but it's just a confirmation of reality after the RahXephon's destruction of the Dolem. Congratulations, Watari-kun."

"It was all because of the Foundation. Thank you for your assistance."

"Not at all. I had nothing to do with it."

It seemed like they were just making small talk, but they were both maneuvering to find a weakness that they could strike. I was a novice compared to them. I could never speak so casually to Lord Babhem.

2nd Movement: The Day of Gathering

Shitow Haruka

"Wow, I haven't splurged like this in ages," said Sayoko.

"Phew, I'm beat! It's hard work, but shopping is the perfect way to get rid of stress."

"What are you gonna have, Haruka? I'll take a vodka martini."

"I'll have a salty dog."

"Sticking with the old standby, I see."

"Please, you shouldn't talk. You always get a vodka martini!"

"True."

The sound of our laughter filled the little bar. We realized we were a bit loud, so we hunched down and continued talking in hushed tones.

"Sayoko, that dress you bought ... isn't it a bit daring?"

"There's a party soon. A girl's gotta try."

"I can't believe it's already Christmas."

"For single women it's the big event. You have to get into it."

"I'm going to have to work on Christmas Eve, I bet."

"That's how a lot of women who work end up; they don't find love before it's too late. But, Haruka, you still have some time."

"At my age, there isn't much time left."

"Don't talk to me about age."

"What's that, dearie?" I said, faking deafness, and we both laughed.

"So work's busy, then?" Sayoko asked.

"Yeah. I know you're busy, too, but since the RahXephon came it's been awful. And on top of that work, I also have to do everything with the cooperation of the Earth Federation Information Division."

"It's been like that for me, too, day in and day out: research, analysis, evaluation research, analysis, evaluation, again and again. I've had enough."

"How's Ayato-kun doing at your lab?"

"Ayato-kun this, Ayato-kun that. That's all it's been since you got back from Tokyo." Sayoko said, sneering at me over her glass.

"Yeah, but he *is* the RahXephon's pilot. Of course he's going to need attention. I mean, from you, too. Your research lab is there for all that reason, after all."

"You're right. But it gets to me after a while. Not that Ayato-kun isn't a good kid or anything.... I mean, he works well now, but, you know, it didn't go so well at first. He does all he can for us now. Tomorrow we'll do a transfer experiment. But still...." She trailed off, clearly concerned about something.

"What is it? You can tell me. We're friends, you know."

"It's Dr. Itsuki. He's been strange lately."

"Really? He seems like his usual self to me."

"I'm with him all the time, so I can see things you wouldn't notice."

She shot me a triumphant look. Sayoko must have been unaware of my past relationship with Itsuki-kun. No, maybe she did know, maybe that's why she was saying something like that.

"Dr. Itsuki has a way of pushing people away. But he seems to

do that even more with Ayato-kun. Sometimes he says something in a friendly voice, but it's really him being mean in a roundabout way. And you know how he tries to maintain a certain amount of distance from people to stay detached? With Ayato-kun, he doesn't act like that at all. It's like he's testing their relationship--like he's being hesitant."

Itsuki-kun was acting like that? I wondered why.

"I think he feels the same about the RahXephon. Sometimes he looks at it like he hates it. And he calls it 'that thing' a lot, but only when we're alone."

I think she had wanted to tell me that last part most of all, and it was the first I had heard of it. He hated the RahXephon? Why? I decided to investigate a little when I had a chance. I suddenly realized something.

I knew almost nothing about him. I had no idea where he'd been born or what kind of life he'd had. I almost laughed aloud. I don't think I ever tried to find out anything about him. Who *was* Itsuki-kun, anyway?

A song I knew came on, "The Fate of Ka'Tun."

"Wow, I haven't heard this in ages. It used to be played all the time back then."

Sayoko narrowed her eyes when I said that. Whoops. "The Fate of Ka'Tun" was one of Itsuki-kun's favorites. She probably had taken me saying "back then" to mean ... well, exactly what it meant. But no matter how many times I'd told her Itsuki-kun meant nothing to me, she always countered with "It's OK. I'm not into him or anything." She was that kind of woman.

Itsuki-kun really meant nothing to me, though.

Not anymore.

Kunugi Jin

"Whoa, the average temperature in December is seventy-three degrees? That means I can swim! This is gonna be a good trip!" said Futagami, too loud and to no one in particular. His voice echoed throughout the ship.

"Why was he chosen to cover this?" I asked Director Watari.

"Joint operations with the United Self-Defense Forces will surely increase. It's only a matter of time 'til our secret weapon isn't a secret any more. A little lip-service will go a long way."

"Is that so, sir?"

"Yes, it is."

Even before the RahXephon took out the Dolem at Matsumoto, dozens of amateur photographers had already gotten pictures of it. We were trying to keep it under wraps as a USDF secret weapon, but even that wouldn't last long. If it was going to get out, it would be best if we could control who knew what. Even so, why Futagami?

I had done a search of Amato News' records for the last twenty years, but there wasn't a single article attributed to Futagami Johji. Even the dates on his pay slips for over ten years in the Hokkaido branch of Amato were suspicious. The only thing that was certain was he wasn't just a reporter. What I couldn't put my finger on was just which organization he really worked for. I had a guess, though.

"It will be nice to visit a southern island," he commented casually, suddenly much closer to me. Futagami must have gotten bored with talking to himself, because he was now headed this way down the aisle.

"About the report when we get there...", he said, his voice hinting at something more.

"Don't worry about it. We have a cute escort waiting for you," the Director said dryly, getting a good laugh out of Futagami.

"Good, I'll be looking forward to that!"

A cute escort? Oh ... I got what the Director meant and let out a little chuckle.

"There it is," Futagami said, leaning over me to point out the window. "So that is humankind's fortress, the last line of defense against the Mu, Niraikanai."

Outside the window you could see the arc of Niraikanai. The last line of defense against the Mu? It really was the *only* line of defense, and that only because of the RahXephon's presence.

Shitow Megumi

I saw Ayato come into the Command Center and I began to giggle.

"What?"

"You know what they say, 'The clothes make the man'," I said. It was the first time I'd seen an FH Suit, and it looked kind of cool, but I couldn't help but laugh to see Ayato wearing it.

"Leave it alone, OK?"

Ayato stood in front of the abacus bead, what he called the art-piece in the middle of the Center. He had said he was doing a transfer experiment, so why was he standing there?

"So, it's not just a piece of art?" Kim asked.

"It's actually a part of the ruins from Neriya Shrine that was brought in," Yoma-yan explained.

Oh, wow, I didn't know that. But what was the point of it being in here? It just seemed like a big hunk of stuff getting in the way.

"So, what's going on?" I asked Yoma-yan, but my sister answered first from the corner.

"Don't worry, everything will be fine."

Humph. That was not what I was talking about. Still, she seemed kind of worried.

"Mr. Itsuki says they have the receiver ready. Well, shall we try it out?" asked Mr. Yagumo. Ayato gave a slight nod, and then held his hand out to the Terra mark on the abacus bead.

This was a transfer experiment? What were they talking about?

Suddenly, the surface around the mark began to glow.

Before I even had time to wonder what was happening, Ayato's hand was drawn into the glowing surface of the abacus bead.

What? I'd touched it before--it was just cold stone. So how could Ayato pass through it like it was water?

Before our disbelieving eyes, Ayato disappeared through the abacus bead. When he vanished, the glow ebbed until there was nothing left. Was the experiment over?

I didn't have a clue as to what had just happened. I found myself even more amazed when it finally sunk in just how incredible it was.

After a short pause, the crowd gave a brief and subdued bout of applause, almost as if they were disappointed. It was like they had expected something a little more grand, like having everyone simultaneously get a terrible pain in their head, or perhaps having all the instrument panels

in the Command Center go haywire, or the very least hear a terrible roar.

He had just passed into the stone like it was nothing.

Oh, I thought, *I think I've got it*. It was because Neriya Shrine had accepted Ayato, just as we had, like it was nothing.

"I wonder how it works."

"I have no idea, but I bet Dr. Kisaragi would know," Kim answered sensibly.

Of course he would. He knew everything.

Kisaragi Itsuki

How exactly does all of this work? I wondered to myself, but couldn't find an answer. There was no logical explanation at all. The Neriya, Missing Nothing began to glow, and the RahXephon's chest opened, exposing the Crystal of Xephon which glowed as well. A single beam of light connected them. Gradually, the beam widened, and when the path of light reached its limit, Ayato smoothly appeared. As if he were the detached spirit of the machine, he floated in mid-air along the path of light and was drawn into the Crystal of Xephon.

"Do we have the data from the FH Suit?"

"Nothing's coming through at all," Sayoko said in a businesslike voice. Was it rejecting the suit, even though its system had been made from the Over-Technology of the Neriya Shrine? Most likely Ayato wasn't even conscious. If he had been, he would've said he was in the cockpit like always.

The shimmering from the Crystal of Xephon diminished and the chest plate slowly closed.

"Data from the FH Suit has returned to normal. Heart rate, blood pressure, and brain wave levels all showing normal."

The transfer was complete. But the RahXephon stood still, as if Ayato had not come aboard. The only difference was that the wings on its head had opened a bit, and the Eyes of Truth were directed at me. The stare seemed to pierce to the depths of my soul. They glowed at me as if to say, "I know what you truly seek."

Whatever. It was fine if it knew my desires, as long as Ayato didn't.

We had proven the Winged Path of Neriya's existence.

Jean-Patrick Shapplin

When I disembarked from the transport plane, the warm winds of the southern islands enveloped me. My nostrils filled with the briny smell of the sea. I would never get to like it here, since the salty air got into everything, corroding machinery. It was probably my imagination--since the maintenance crews worked hard on the vehicles every day--but I felt like the souls of the machines rotted away a little every day.

I knelt and placed my hand on the runway. It was just something I did the first time I landed on an airstrip. After all, I would be using this runway every day from now. I could feel faint vibrations against my palm pressed flat on the deck. It was the unique rhythm of waves striking the mega-flotilla. The flowing easterly waves created an interference and formed a slow rhythm. It was the music of our life-mother, the sea. I concentrated on the sound for a bit. I heard the sound of approaching footsteps and looked up to see Elvy approaching.

"I see nothing's changed with you, Maestro."

I stood, trying to hide my embarrassment, like child who'd been caught stealing cookies from the cookie jar.

Elvy Hadhiyat, my rose, had finally been able to bloom into a great flower. I could see it in the glint of determination in her eyes.

"It's been a long time, Bunga Mawar."

"It's been a long time since anyone's called me that," Elvy said with a smile. "How is it, seeing your former student all grown up?"

"As the great artist Leonardo Da Vinci once said, the greatest insult to an instructor is when their pupil cannot surpass them. I'm glad I have not been paid that insult."

"That's not true at all. I still have a lot to learn from you."

"No, there's barely anything left at all."

"But there are a few things, right? I want to squeeze out every bit of knowledge I can."

"You're still insatiable, like when you were in training."

The training had been particularly hard, even for a man, and she'd pulled through it by sheer willpower alone. Well, I guess saying "even for a man" isn't politically correct. She had been my best student, male or female. And now my former student was my superior. I didn't think there was anything that could make me happier.

"Hey," a familiar voice said from over my shoulder.

I turned around and saw a blonde ponytail wagging like a horse's tail as she approached. It was "Crazy Horse" Cathy. Next to her was "Tonpu" Donny, my old teammates.

We checked out the airport facilities that would be our new



home.

"The Shinsei is a great plane," said Danny.

"It has good speed and maneuverability. But then I always could beat Donny at just about anything."

Donny ignored Cathy's wisecrack and continued.

"It does have some problems with its takeoff characteristics, but it makes up for it with its power output. The runway and hangar are both clear to Level 4. There doesn't seem to be any problems with the hardware. It also looks like we can apply the same program the Earth Federation uses in cooperation with unmanned aircraft."

"So then the only problem is with the maintenance crew," I mumbled.

After Cathy's comments from before, and now my remark, Elvy looked at me with expectant eyes.

"Is there something wrong, Jean-Patrick?" She knew what I wanted to say.

"Of course the maintenance crew can take care of the vehicles just fine," I explained, "but that's all. I can't feel any soul in their work."

"Souls and destinies--people born in the 20th century love things they can't see," Cathy said, with more than a hint of sarcasm in her voice. I knew that she agreed with me, though. No one believed in destiny more than pilots.

"Spoken like a true white person," Donny added.

"Only believing what you can see, you know, means...."

"Yeah, yeah. You wanted us to put an 'oriental feeling' into the living space, so now it's full of Asian crap."

I had to smile at how Cathy and Donny went at it. They had been

brought in from different units, but it was like they'd been together the whole time.

"It's been two years, but you guys haven't changed a bit." I laughed.

"It hasn't been that long!" Cathy said in disbelief.

"It's been two years since the four of us were together."

They all looked like they wouldn't have realized it if I hadn't said it. This was a good team, and they didn't want to feel like there was a two-year blank. But just like old times, I was the first one to put out my hand.

For a second I felt kind of silly, using such a clichéd gesture, but Elvy smiled and gave me a little nod. Then she put her hand on top of mine, and Cathy and Donny followed suit.

Our hands joined together and the warmth from them spread. We were a real quartet. And we would make some nice melodies. I was sure of it.

Cathy MacMahon

Gimme a break! Why do we have to do stuff like this? How lame. I noticed a sea-plane land, and was told that it was the director and commander returning. We had to go out to meet them.

The lift came up, and I saw that all of them but one were old men. The young one dressed in white looked like he'd get shot down in a second if he were a pilot, but the older guys had the look of determined survivors. Even the one that was definitely a civilian, who tried to seem harmless, had the face of a seasoned ace. We approached them and saluted.

"First Lieutenant Elvy Hadhiyat, reporting. Assuming command as of today of Alpha Platoon in the Terra Air Force."

"I've heard. We're counting on you, Lieutenant," the tall, low-keyed old man said with a nod. So this was Commander Kunugi? Which meant the one in the odd black coat behind him was Director Watari. So who were the old civilian and the young punk, then? I didn't have much time to think before the little bastard made a cutting comment.

"Elvy Hadhiyat ... oh, you're the one pilot who was able to come back safely from Operation Overlord," he said, his voice ripe with sarcasm. Elvy's shoulders stiffened.

"You must be the Goddess of Luck ... or would that be Goddess of Death?"

With that last comment, the air around us grew tense. Could I keep silent after that insult? Just as I was about to step forward to say something, the older civilian approached Elvy.

"Well, you sure are a nice specimen. How is it inside Tokyo Jupiter? Oh, sorry. I'm Futagami Johji from Amato News. Is Tokyo Tower really blue now? I hear the post boxes are also blue. I would love to meet with you sometime, to hear anything you have to say about the inside of Tokyo Jupiter."

I knew he wasn't just any civilian. With his benign-sounding questions, he managed to cut straight through the tension in the air. If this had been a dogfight, he would've been on us in the middle of a turn before we'd even noticed. The Lieutenant's face showed that she clearly didn't know how she should respond.

"Lieutenant, how is the maintenance group going?" Commander Kunugi asked, tossing her a lifeline. "Go on. They've been told to hand

over control to you when you arrive."

"Yes, sir."

We saluted and did an about-face. We could hear their whispered conversation from behind us as we left them.

"She really is quite a woman," said Futagami. "I'm betting that she's the Goddess of Luck."

"I don't like to gamble."

Cold words. It was the punk again. Just as I was contemplating knocking in his teeth, I noticed Maestro was looking at me. "Don't," his eyes said. Yeah, yeah. Of course, I was Crazy Horse; the stallion who liked to throw her riders.

Man, but he really pissed me off. When we started the familiarization training for the Shinseis, I would put that punk's picture up on my targeting sight.

Yagumo Souichi

"Welcome back."

Commander Kunugi had finally returned.

No one else understood--well, everyone but Kim--that I'd been completely on edge for the last few days. The duties of Lieutenant Commander had been weighing heavily on me. I bet I looked relieved when I saw his face. Mr. Kunugi's eyes seemed to harden when he saw me.

"Sorry about all of this, leaving everything to you. Oh, here's a souvenir from the mainland," Director Watari said with a cheerful smile as he handed me the present. Kawara-style bean-paste sweets? Where

exactly had they gone?

"Thank you very much. You know how much I like sweets."

"I'd also like you to show someone around."

"Oh, I get it. So he's my cute escort?"

Turning to see who had spoken, I saw what looked like a nice middle-aged man with a wry smile. So this was Mr. Futagami. They had said he was from Amato News, but I could tell that there was more to him than that.

"You want me to show him around the manmade island, then?"

"Sorry, but would you?" asked the Director. His gaze left me as he noticed someone lurking near the Command Center.

"Oh, Gomi-kun!" he shouted. "Thanks for the hard work. Here's a souvenir from the mainland...."

He walked toward Mr. Gomi holding the bag very carefully. It was sweet natto from Kyoto. Really, where exactly had they gone?

"I see Mr. Watari hasn't changed a bit," I said, and Commander Kunugi smiled.

It was good having the Commander back.

Nanamori Sayoko

The experiments with the RahXephon continued.

"How do you feel?" Dr. Itsuki asked Ayato-kun.

"I'm fine, but I do feel a little tense."

"The next one's going to be a little more intense."

"That's OK."

Dr. Itsuki was watching the RahXephon like you would look at

a lab rat. It was like I'd told Haruka--he looked at it with a colder expression than he ever looked at anything else. I wondered why that was. Did he hate the RahXephon, or did he hate Ayato-kun? Or was it both?

"He's been very helpful lately." I noted, trying to gauge his reaction.

"It's a big thing he's done--the boy who left his homeland to fight to save the world."

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

"Don't be unfair. I do value what he's doing."

He didn't appreciate Ayato-kun at all. It sounded like he was angry that he couldn't be up there instead.

"I want to collect all of the data today."

"I understand."

In the FH Suit there was a communication system linked to the outside world, and a data system just for internal information. Sometimes the two data sets didn't match, so it could be a pain to sort through it. Especially on days like today--doing a transfer experiment where the communication would get cut off and come back on--the chance for deviations was high.

I went to the forward examining room's changing room, hoping to catch Ayato-kun after he'd finished getting out of the FH Suit. OK, so it wasn't really a changing room; it was more like a small kitchen we'd partitioned off for him.

"Can I come in?"

"Uh, yeah, sure."

I heard hurried rustling sounds. I decided to take a peek. Sometimes seeing a younger man's skin was nice. I wasn't Haruka, but I

could still steal a bite for myself. Unfortunately, when I opened the curtain he had already put on a T-shirt.

"Good work today. You can leave the suit there."

"I guess I'll see you later, then."

He was leaving. We were together in the narrow room, and I decided to have a little fun. I moved to retrieve the discarded suit.

For just an instant, we were close enough to feel each other's warmth. I could feel his chest, still young and not quite filled out. I could tell he'd gotten a taste of how I felt also. I felt the ticklish warmth of his gaze on my breasts. He quickly turned to look away, obviously a little flustered. For just a second, I could smell the special scent of a young man. He couldn't hide that from me, no matter how much he tried.

I folded the FH Suit like nothing had happened, chuckling silently to myself. As I folded it, I pulled the memory stick from the data box.

"Ms. Nanamori?" I heard him ask. So he was still there?

"You and Ms. Haruka are close, right?"

I wondered what was up. Did he realize? No, he couldn't; he was still too young. I mean, Haruka didn't get it herself.

"Pretty close, I guess." I was old enough to easily parry his question. "Maybe not best friends, though."

"What stuff, you know, what kind of things does she like? I know she likes to drink some."

"You're only asking about Haruka? What about Megu-chan?"

"She's easy to figure out."

Easy to figure out? He was pretty easy to see through, as well, but he didn't know that.

"You're wondering what to get her for Christmas, aren't you?"

"Uh, no, it isn't that. I want to get her something for taking care of me. I'm going to get my first paycheck soon. I've had some of it advanced to me, so it won't be much, but.... Jeez, what am I babbling on about?" He turned away for a second, like he was embarrassed, then he looked back at me.

"Things are pretty much the same here as in Tokyo, I guess"

Oh, I finally got it. He was getting used to life here. So that's why he'd been so helpful lately. And it was because of Haruka and Megumi. Seeing him like this made me want to have a little more fun.

"You're not sad, being away from your family? You can tell me if it's too much to bear." I tried my hardest to act sympathetic, but it didn't seem to go over well with him.

"Thanks, Ms. Nanamori, but I'm OK," he said, and promptly left the room.

I didn't like that type--simple kids like him. He probably wasn't suspicious of people at all. He had even said thanks just now. It kind of irked me to think he believed that I was really being sympathetic. Did he realize I was just fooling around, or did he think I was actually concerned that he was away from his family and might be sad?

Something deep in my chest hurt, as a little part of my heart hardened.

I met up with Dr. Itsuki, who had a troubled look on his face.

"I've got the data from the suit," I told him. He didn't answer.

"Doctor?"

"Oh, sorry. Where's Ayato-kun?"

"He already went home."

"I see."

"Is something wrong?"

"No.... I just got a call, that's all. I have to go meet someone ... in private."

In private? I felt the lump in my chest get even harder.

"If there are people around, it will be OK. But if it will just be the two of us ... I would rather not go."

He seemed honestly troubled, which somehow made me feel a bit relieved. The one thing I could be sure of was he wasn't going off to have fun with someone else. But who was it? Who could possibly fluster him this much?

Yagumo Souichi

When I could finally get away from Mr. Futagami and get back to the Command Center, I saw the commander and Ms. Haruka in the middle of a conversation.

"I see. You've also been transferred into the Operations Division starting today. I wonder how it will affect him."

"You mean Ayato-kun? He's doing well. I hear he's also been very helpful with the experiments in the Analysis Group."

I had to dump the Kawara-style bean-paste sweets on Ms. Haruka. I didn't like sweet things that much.

"Here, have some candy from Director Watari," I said and passed her the bag. "Ayato-kun's a lot tougher than I'd thought," I added.

"Or maybe," Ms. Haruka speculated, "it's because he's met someone special."

"Really? You're speaking from experience?"

"Souichi, could you tell me about the news reporter?" Commander Kunugi asked. He said it in a relaxed way, but his eyes looked intense.

"He's gone on to the main island."

"To Nirai Island?"

"Yes. It looks like he's planning on staying for a while, so he wants to find some places to hang out. I wonder what he really wants here."

The commander was not pleased. Futagami's move to the main island meant he had lost his tail on the man, and that his reason for being here was still unclear.

"Come to think of it, when Inspector Isshiki heard that the reporter was coming, he went out to meet him in a hurry. He must be quite concerned about the media."

I still didn't know which group Inspector Isshiki was affiliated with, but it did seem to be the same as Mr. Futagami's organization. The commander was unfazed. After all, he probably knew exactly which group each one of them worked for.

Isshiki Makoto

"So you're the Inspector from the Earth Federation," Itsuki practically spat.

"I'm here to observe you, of course," I replied.

He just pretended to be busy operating the boat, without even sparing a smile. What a way to treat me.

The boat went down the water route of the Neriya Shrine. The area around us bristled with carved columns sticking out of the water to support the oddly shaped roof. It was the first time I'd seen it, but for some reason I felt like I'd seen it before. Oh, of course. It was a scene much like I'd often seen growing up on that island. *Shit*. Now I remembered it all.

"You remember that night we snuck out together, don't you?" It was the memory that we had kept from that night. He finally responded.

"At your invitation, yes."

"And it ended in disaster."

Thinking back, I laughed. The sound of oars slapping against the water ... the island water's stagnant smell ... the color of Itsuki's skin as a boy. Yeah ... we were the chosen ones.

"Don't you feel hollow surrounded by that bunch?"

"Not at all. I'm used to being alone."

"Don't say sad things like that."

"But now...," he said mysteriously, then grabbed an umbrella. Why an umbrella? Before that thought was fully formed, I heard the sound of falling water rushing at me from behind. I glanced over my shoulder and saw a curtain of water fast approaching. Before I could even shout out, the boat shot through the water.

Splash!

I realized too late what the umbrella was for. He was looking at me blank-faced, completely dry. I looked and felt like a drowned rat. Like I said earlier, what a way to treat me.

The boat glided out into the central area of the shrine that housed the RahXephon.

The white giant. I gazed up at it, the giant that played forbidden music. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Itsuki looking toward the RahXephon. His eyes looked sad and bitter.

I understood now. She was a goddess who could never respond to his desires. He had no reason to be happy here.

Futagami Johji

Lemon soda. It'd been a long time since I'd had any. I slid my card through the slot on the lock and there was a loud click as it unbolted. Wow, this was an antique. I popped the top, tossed the cap away, then let the marble drop down inside. Crap, it was all fizzy from me opening it too quickly. I got it all over my pants. That was my best suit, too, and my travel allowance wouldn't cover the dry cleaning. Worst of all, it looked like I pissed my pants. *Shit*. I was ambling toward the front of the shop to drink the pop, mumbling complaints, when I heard someone say "Um..." like I was about to get a scolding. I glanced at the speaker and stopped in my tracks.

The mark. It was him....

I had found the target: Kamina Ayato.

Of course it was him. I mean, that was why I had come all the way here to this candy store. But, anyway, for first contact with him, I couldn't have done it better.

"You can't drink it like that, or the lemon drop will stop it up."

Huh? Looking at the bottle, I saw that the marble would get in the way if I tried to drink it like this. It'd been so long that I'd forgotten about it.

"You catch the drop on the hollow spot there," he said, without a bit of sarcasm. He was not trying to be a know-it-all. He was being nice out of the kindness of his heart. He was a good kid.

"Thanks," I said, grabbing a seat next to him. The lemon soda, combined with the gentle breeze, really hit the spot.

"Are you on vacation?"

"I was sent here on business. It's tough being a working man. I guess a young student wouldn't know what I'm talking about."

"I'm also working now, so I know what you mean."

"How rude of me. What kind of work do you do?"

So, would my prey tell the truth? No, he couldn't, but I wanted to see how he'd dodge that one.

"Hm? I, uh, kinda get in this vehicle...." he hedged before stalling out. Then he hit me with a doozy.

"And deliver pizza!"

That's the best he can do?

It was hard to stop myself from blurting out the truth, it really was. Of all the things he could come up with, he had to say pizza delivery. He would have no idea, being from Tokyo, but there hadn't been any pizza delivery places for a long time.

"Really, pizza delivery? They still have that here?"

I tried to sound impressed. I should be an actor.

"Um...." He looked like he didn't know how to respond. How cute.

"I ate a lot of pizzas back in school. Oh, I see, they still have that here on this island."

"Yeah, that's right. I was surprised myself."

He clung to the lifeline I had tossed him so readily that I had to stifle a laugh. Just as I was about to see how far I could drag him along, his cell phone rang.

If his phone was ringing, that meant something had happened. A Dolem, probably.

So this simple boy was fighting with Dolem?

"Work?" I asked innocently.

"Yes, excuse me."

Not like it was something to apologize for. He stood up and went to leave, but then turned back to me.

"If you return the empty bottle, the store will give you a refund."

"Yeah, I gotcha. Thanks again."

He gave a little bow, then ran off to get inside the RahXephon. He really was a nice kid. To tell the truth, I'd imagined he'd be a brat, but I couldn't really write a bad report on him with him being that nice. No, no, I couldn't let my personal feelings get in the way of the investigation. I had to make sure my report was unbiased.

Deciding what to do was for the upper-level guys, not for a guy at the bottom ... like me.

Shitow Megumi

"RahXephon, ready for launch."

"Alpha Squadron, switch to a digital skip from the current communications band."

"Alpha Squadron, all units engaged."

The Command Center was buzzing with activity.

"D1 spotted above the Pacific coming in on Niraikanai at 40 kph. Interception estimated at 14:08."

You go, Megumi! You said that like a pro. Then that idiot Ayato had to chime in.

"What's fourteen-oh-eight?"

I was about to explain, but my sister beat me to it.

"That's how we say 2:08 PM in military time. In other words, in about 20 minutes. The target D1 is a bipedal type. What appear to be legs are around 10 km long. Both the left and right seem identical, and each part is assumed to share the same capabilities."

Man, did it have to be so rigid, with all this military terminology? But she handled it easily. But what was with this Dolem?

On the Command Center's screen was the image of two columns coming out of a low-hanging cloud and jutting down into the sea.

Way weird.

One of the columns darted out of the water, almost like it was going to go back into the cloud, then it shot back down near a small island. A huge splash of water shot up around it. Though it was probably many meters tall, it was hard to get a feel for the perspective and it looked like just a little spray of water near the base of the column.

Very weird.

Elvy Hadhiyat

It was strange having the RahXephon flying right next to me.

Why were we out there? Why were we going after the Dolem? They didn't need us with the RahXephon here. Doubts floated through my

mind for a second, then vanished as soon as I remembered who was flying it.

It was Kamina Ayato.

That boy shouldn't have been going off to fight. That's why I was there.

"Target acquired at eleven and one at 10,000 meters."

Maestro's voice broke me out of my reverie and I fixed my gaze on the enemies ahead. They were the two columns sticking out of the low-hanging cloud.

"Confirmed. All units make your approach in formation. RahXephon, stay to the rear."

Alpha Squadron's replies came promptly. A bit after that, Ayato answered hesitantly.

"Yes ma'am. But are you going to be OK?"

I didn't need him worrying about me.

I accelerated the Shinsei, bringing it about towards the enemy. I was flying in at nearly max speed, but its size didn't change a bit. It was so huge that I was having difficulty judging the distance. My sight appeared on the monitor and I got a lock. It was hard not to, with a target so big.

"Alpha Squadron, missiles away."

"Roger, Alpha Squadron, Fox 2."

Eight streams of light sliced through the sky and shot straight toward the column.

There was a flash from the column, then several fireballs appeared. Alpha Squadron shot out ahead, soaring through the smoke to get in close.

"All hits confirmed."

"Report."

"No change."

Naturally, the usual anti-Dolem warheads wouldn't work, I thought, just in time to see a massive crack run up the column. Then, the sections where the missiles had struck crumbled to pieces like a smashed pot.

The bottom part, easily three-hundred meters long, broke off slowly, almost as if in slow motion. A huge line of water shot up as the broken piece slid down into the water.

"We did it!" Maestro called out.

We all thought we'd finished it. But it didn't fall. Usually bipeds fall if they lose a leg, right?

"It's still standing. It's just floating, I mean," said Yagumo over the headset.

"That lousy cheat!" Cathy yelled.

Just then my proximity alarm sounded and multiple enemies appeared on the monitor. Where were they? Things that looked golf balls stuck to tees fell out of the clouds.

The D2 alert went off. They were Dolem, all right.

They shot out at 250 kph, spread their wings and decelerated as one.

"Alpha, Bravo, fan out to 4 o'clock, formation A." I called out orders for the others and accelerated my Shinsei, narrowly missing beams emitted from the heads of a Dolem. I shot out with my vulcan and my volley of bullets hit, destroying the Dolem's head. The rest of it plummeted downward in pieces.

A second one came up behind me.

I evaded its beam, twisting to the right as I slid the craft in a circle, proving the Shinsei's handling abilities.

Through the side of my canopy, I saw Cathy being chased by a Dolem.

She raised the Shinsei's neck back, trying to decelerate on the shock wave under her to drop in behind it.

"Alpha Four, cover Alpha Three." I shouted and fired off a missile.

Another hit.

I shot through the falling shards of the exploded Dolem and sharply raised the neck of my ship. In less than a second, sea and sky changed places, and the G's squeezed me hard against my seat.

"Alpha Two to Alpha One, the majority of the D2 are heading for the RahXephon."

I had no time to react, as a Dolem appeared right in front of me. I finished it off with a burst from my vulcan, then saw more. *Shit*. No matter how many I dropped, they just kept coming.

Several Dolem were threatening the RahXephon. All at once they fired their beams, and the RahXephon was engulfed in fire.

The RahXephon shot out a fist, but it was too late, and the Dolem easily avoided the punch.

Fuck! What was I doing saying he should stay at the back and not fight? We were having enough trouble taking them on one at a time, let alone all at once.

The Dolem flew out in a single line and accelerated.

"Watch out!" I shouted, just as the Dolem smashed into the

RahXephon.

I saw the RahXephon trying to shield itself with its right hand, but it was immediately engulfed in a massive explosion.

Did they get him? They couldn't have....

As the smoke began to dissipate, I saw a vague shimmering. What? What was shining there? Then, the RahXephon appeared.

The glow was enveloped the fist it had used to shield itself from the Dolem's blast.

What the.... Was it really a shield?

The D2 alert rang out again. Looking up, I saw a fresh storm Dolem raining out of the clouds. There was no end to them.

Glancing at the battlefield map, I saw that RahXephon, Cathy, and the others were surrounded with Dolem. Only I was flying here in the calm, the tranquility that appears for just a second in a fight. A pilot had to make their decisions in these precious moments. Which enemy to strike? Which ally to help?

I pulled the control lever up without hesitating. I would strike the enemy HQ.

"Bunga Mawar!" I heard Maestro call out, but I ignored him and punched the gas. Skimming past the still-falling waves of Dolem, I rose, flying into the sea of clouds.

"I won't use a child's help!" I shouted.

He had no place in this battle. It was our fight.

I plunged into the clouds.... No, they were more than just clouds. Hell, what did I care?

The engine roared and I shot out from the sea of clouds.

The wide blue sky spread out before me.

Then, the sound of singing rang out from above the clouds.
It was a D1 aria!

Kim Hotal

Megumi yanked off her headphones with a shriek. It was like her brain had been short-circuited by the D1 aria.

Even from this far away it rang out, shaking the glass of the Command Center.

"Commander!" Sou-chan shouted, turning from the battle monitor to look up at Commander Kunugi.

"Sound the retreat," he ordered. "Tell Hadhiyat to pull back."

"Alpha One, pull out.... Alpha One, do you read?"

I tried to send the signal to Elvy, trying channel after channel, but all I got was static.

"Alpha One is not responding."

"Keep trying."

"Alpha One, do you read me? Please respond."

"Sir, Alpha One has stopped!" Yohei said, his voice heavy with disbelief. How could that be? She stopped? Looking at the monitor, I saw that her craft's indicator showed no movement. What the hell was happening above the clouds?

Elvy Hadhiyat

I'd barely managed to put up the D1 aria shield, but at this range it had no effect. The sound blasted through and pounded into me. I felt

like someone had shoved a fist into my head and stirred. It took all my willpower just to keep from vomiting.

The giant Dolem's legs were on either side of me.

My Shinsei was caught between them, like a helpless insect trapped in a spider's web. I cranked up to full throttle, but couldn't move at all. The fear of being immobilized--on land I would never feel it, but being immobile above the clouds at 3,000 meters ... this was the definition of fear. As if that weren't enough, the D1 aria continued to buffet my ship. They were really giving me the red carpet treatment here.

My brain felt like it was melting away in drops.

My whole body was as heavy as a slab of meat.

Just when I was about to give up, the sound stopped.

Opening my eyes, I saw only the RahXephon filling my hazy field of vision.

It was singing.

Its song completely blocked out the D1 aria.

Shit. I was just saved by the RahXephon.

"Are you all right, Ms. Elvy?" Ayato-kun asked over my headset. His voice wasn't something I wanted to hear. What I wanted to hear were the shrieking death throes of the enemy.

"Forget about me, the Dolem...." I began, but had to stop. It took all of my strength just to say that.

The RahXephon was rising up to destroy the Dolem's body ... or it should've been. But it couldn't ascend. Looking closely, I saw the clouds were clinging to its legs. No, not clouds! This was the Dolem's defense system!

The sea of clouds emitted a bright light, then fired out all of the

power that had been stored inside. The energy beam was directed right at the RahXephon.

"Augh!"

I tried to cover my ears, but my arms felt like lead. I heard Ayato's scream. It was more painful than the D1 aria. No! I didn't want to hear that!

A bolt of plasma coursed over the RahXephon's skin, arcing like a finger of death into the sky.

"It's ... it's ... burning...."

Ayato was still alive, somehow saved by the RahXephon. But he had to be in intense pain.

"Hot...."

Fight it, Ayato!

"It's ... ahh...."

Wasn't there anything I could do?

Grabbing the control stick, I willed my body forward with every ounce of strength I possessed and tried to press the fire button. What would usually take just an instant dragged on, like strands of fiber were stretched not just around the Shinsei, but around my body as well. The sound of his cries of pain stabbed into my head.

"Ahhh.... Augh!!"

I finally pressed the fire button as I was about to pass out.

A missile charged with all of my thoughts raced out toward the RahXephon.

It was driven by some invisible force and the missile was sucked into the mass of the Dolem's body.

Direct hit! But ... no. A barrier formed of what looked like

strands of a web stopped the impact of the explosion.

"Fuck!"

I was left with nothing to do. I could only sit here, floating 3,000 meters above the ground, and listen to the sound of Ayato's cries.

"All activity from the RahXephon has stopped."

"Pilot life signs down to level 3."

"Ayato-kun, please respond. Ayato-kun! Can you hear me? Please answer, Ayato!"

Mixed in the confusion of the Command Center, I heard Haruka's screamed pleas.

Fuck! I had never felt so completely helpless.

Kisaragi Quon

I was roused by the union of synapses in my brain. Always the same room. Always the same place. Always the same atmosphere. But not the same sound. The peal of a discordant sound. The peal of the Xephon's ill playing. Ollin, that's not allowed. Playing the song for someone, the rotting of the soul. The fierce sound of thoughts dawning, fulfilling dreams, the fiery core of it all. That was hatred. That was sadness. A dream. A mystery. Thoughts twisted up into air couldn't reach you, Ollin. Nothing more than assembled bags. If the fork was missed, one by one points to the future would disappear. Like a popping bubble, a future blinked out of existence. For life, action is choice. The sadness of a life, opposing the third law of thermodynamics, decides the future. Awaken to your mission. But he couldn't hear my voice. It didn't ring in Ollin's ears. The path of our genocide growing stronger, stronger, stronger,



STRONGER...

Shitow Haruka

"Life signs from the RahXephon have risen to level 9. Continuing to rise. Unable to calculate levels."

Megumi's voice rang through the Command Center, but nobody was listening.

Everyone's eyes were riveted to the monitor. In the picture being sent by Alpha One, you could faintly see the RahXephon and the Dolem facing off. Just when I thought it was finished, the RahXephon suddenly came to life.

The RahXephon's palm glowed with quantum energy, then what looked like a beam fired out toward the Dolem.

No, it was more like a sword than a beam.

The Dolem put up its defense barrier immediately, and there was a flash, a wave of plasma running out. When we could see again, the Dolem's barrier was gone and the sword of light jutted from it.

Did he get it?

He did!

The sword of light had pierced the Dolem.

It shuddered, writhing in agonizing death throes.

The Dolem crumbled and fell apart like a lump of dry earth.

It broke apart and fell from the sky. A huge splash of water rose upon impact.

It was hard to tell at this distance, but the column of water probably shot up as high as the cluster of skysrise buildings in Shinjuku. It

spread along the surface of the ocean.

"Send out a tsunami alert to all neighboring areas," the Commander calmly ordered, and the Center's personnel snapped back to life. But I wasn't listening. I stared at the RahXephon on the monitor. It was staring off into the distance. At what? If you followed its line of vision, out beyond the horizon....

You would eventually reach Tokyo Jupiter....

Rikudoh Shougo

This Futagami was an odd fellow. He arrived suddenly, asking about one of my former students at the college, and that he wanted to know more about him. Then, before I knew it, we were playing a game of shogi. He seemed to be an average player.

"It was the National Elementary School Art Contest," he said out of nowhere, pushing a knight forward. "A Kamina Ayato is on the list of attendees for the 2009 contest."

At last he'd gotten to what he was here about.

"He was a fifth grader, which would make him twenty-nine if he were still alive. But the Kamina Ayato living here is only seventeen."

"Then they must be different people. I know it's an unusual name, but it isn't impossible for two people of the same sex to have that name."

I took his knight with one of my golds. My move had left an opening and he slid a bishop through it.

"Possibly. But there is one place in the world where time flows differently."

He seemed to have forgotten my king in the confusion of golds and silvers, so I immediately took the bishop with my king.

"I'm sure it's just a coincidence. After all, I thought there was still no way to get through the Defense Barrier."

He slid a pawn right in front of my king.

"Not just yet. But it wouldn't be so surprising if they'd found a way through. Am I right?"

I took the pawn with my king. Futagami pushed his rook forward. It was what I'd been waiting for. His king, still stuck behind his other pieces, now had an open flank. I struck there with my bishop.

"Even still, what would you try to make of it? It's hard to base anything on a single coincidence," I said, placing my hand on the knight I'd taken before. If he took my bishop with his gold there, I'd hit him back with his knight. Futagami didn't have anywhere to hide now.

"Hmmm," he said, crossing his arms in thought.

"Why don't you come again some time."

"Yes, I certainly will," Futagami said, placed a lance he'd had in his hand on the table, and left.

A lance? If he'd put that down on 4f....

This Futagami wasn't someone to be taken lightly.

Shitow Haruka

Elvy had been called into the Commander's office, and now stood there with a blank expression on her face.

"Flying blindly into a cloud of unknown composition, by yourself ... that was an arbitrary decision and was a violation of military law.

If you keep that up in battle, it will surely cost you your life."

"It's my life." Her voice was low. She was dead serious.

"Lt. Hadhiyat, why did you go in alone?" Commander Kunugi asked.

"As squadron commander, I decided it was the best course of action."

"On what grounds?"

"I just had a feeling."

"That's fine, but it is still a violation of military law. Lieutenant Elvy Hadhiyat, you are hereby suspended for two days. That is all."

Elvy, still with an expressionless face, saluted and left the office. All eyes followed her as she left.

"That is my decision, Mr. Inspector," said the Commander, as Inspector Isshiki slowly took off his sunglasses and smiled with a satisfied look.

"That was wise. A place without discipline is a place without organization."

Whatever. I knew he was just happy to see her get punished. I was sure my irritation was visible, but the Commander said he and the inspector had something to talk about and excused me. How lucky I am that he sent me out.

Coming out into the hall, I found Elvy standing beside a window. The setting sun's colors gave her face a hard expression.

"You know, he's a lot like my brother...." she mumbled. I knew who she was talking about immediately.

"Oh, you have a brother?"

"No, had a brother. It was the Week of Disaster. I told him not to go, but he said he had to protect everyone...."

The silence was painful. I wondered why whenever anyone talked about one of those who'd perished in the Great Mu War, they could never get themselves to use the word "died". They always just trailed off, leaving a painful silence. I wondered how many people carried that same intolerable pain with them, and suffered in the same silence.

"So are you OK with all this?" she asked.

"Huh?"

"Are you OK with having the boy fight?"

"Of course I'm not!" I cried. "Do you really think I got Ayato-kun out of Tokyo because I wanted him to fight for us? If that had been the case, then he would have been better off if I'd left him there!"

I had to stop. I'd been sworn to secrecy and if I said any more I'd break that promise. I took a deep breath and calmly decided to change the subject by distracting her with more shouting.

"But that's what we had to do. We had to do all of that, make him fight, to save this world and everyone's future."

I thought I'd done a good job of changing the subject, but Elvy seemed to see right through it. She pinned me with a cold stare.

"I had no idea you had something you absolutely had to protect. I don't. So that's why I'm here. I'm here to prove they don't need Ayato to fight. The time when civilians like my brother had to fight is over. Maybe not yet, but it's something we have to end. That's why they have us, the soldiers."

She was strong. Anyone who could genuinely say something like that was strong.

"That's why I called my old team members. To fight. To risk our lives."

I felt a tightness in my chest. I'd had no idea there was someone else who cared about Ayato-kun so much.

"But I guess that means nothing to someone in the Information Division."

I grabbed her hand reflexively as she attempted to storm off. Elvy wore a puzzled expression, like she didn't grasp the meaning behind my actions. I showed her the sign with my two fingers like Ayato-kun had, and she immediately responded.

"What do you mean? The second person?"

"The second person who cares about Ayato-kun."

"I see. So are you the first one?"

Elvy smiled at me. I smiled back.

Then we shook hands.

1

I was tired. I was really beat after today, and not just because of the fight with the Dolem.

With the electric shock, the water in the cockpit had heated and turned the whole thing into a huge sauna. Just when I'd thought the inside of my head was going to boil, I'd caught a glimpse of Tokyo Jupiter past the Dolem. From beyond the horizon, the red globe had allowed me a brief peek.

It was my homeland, the place I should've been going back to. The place I couldn't go back to. The place where Asahina and Mamoru

and my other friends were. The place where my mom was.

Just then, I hadn't been thinking about how I wanted to defeat the Dolem. I'd only wanted to take out anything that got in between me and Tokyo Jupiter. Then the energy sword had fired out and impaled the Dolem.

When the Dolem had disappeared ... when that thing in my way had disappeared ... if I'd wanted, I could have gone home to Tokyo.

But I didn't.

I had turned and gazed at Niraikanai.

The place where Ms. Haruka and Megumi and everyone else was. It was a place that I'd become connected to. *Could I just throw that away?* was what I'd asked myself.

I hadn't found an answer. I just knew that I had turned my back on Tokyo Jupiter. I had turned my back on my mother.

I traversed the path along the bank to get to the ferry, so I could ride it and contemplate everything, but I saw someone sleeping on the bank. It was the old guy who'd had the lemon soda this morning.

"Hey."

His kind eyes peeked up at me from under his hat. Had I just woken him up?

"Were you sleeping here?"

"The breeze was nice, and I must've drifted off." He got up with a grunt. The wind gently patted me on the head. It was kind of nice.

"I wanted to ask about your job," he said, and I got a little flustered. "It has something to do with your family, right?"

"It's not that, just...."

Just what? I couldn't just say "I pilot the RahXephon in combat."

It was a secret. They'd made me sign a confidentiality agreement or whatever. It wasn't something I could tell someone I had only met twice. So I said something completely unrelated.

"Do you know which way Tokyo is from here?"

He silently pointed toward the northeast. So, it *was* that way.

"Why do you ask?"

"I don't know, I guess I feel connected to there." That's right, I was connected with Tokyo. Even this far away, I was still connected.

"Is that so?" he asked, as the setting sun's rays played complicated shadows across his face.

3rd Movement: The Dreaming Stone

Section 1: Kisaragi Itsuki

"Magnificent. Is this your god?"

Oh, God. This guy was a real pain. He seemed to be fascinated by everything. I wondered exactly why Command had granted access to Neriya Shrine to the press.

"It looks like even gods can get injured," he said, pointing at the parts of the Rahxephon that had been damaged in the last battle.

"Don't worry. The pillar of water will heal the god's wounds," said Ms. Nanamori, appearing from nowhere. Well, she was here now, and it was a pain that I'd have to deal with her. I had more important things to do than this, like examining the fragment of the Dolem the work group had salvaged from one-hundred and twenty meters under the ocean's surface.

The Dolem were strange things. I couldn't even figure out their propulsion system. Though I'd disassembled them, not a trace of their method of locomotion could be found. To put it simply, it was like they were spirits made of earth and stone. They were like the golems of Jewish legend.

"So, these must be the ruins?"

"That is classified information."

Futagami nodded in admiration and went to take some pictures. Wait a second, we couldn't allow that. I snatched his camera away and pulled out his data storage unit.

"I'm sorry, but no pictures."

"Sorry about that. I forgot."

He didn't seem sorry at all; he seemed calm. He probably had a camera hidden somewhere in his clothing. When we left, I'd have to discretely fire an electromagnetic pulse to take care of any pictures he'd gotten. I returned to my examination of the Dolem's remains and my eyes alighted on a curious object. I knelt to examine the item more closely.

What was this? I wondered what it could be. From inside the dry earthen piece I could see a blue crystal. Pinching it in my fingertips, it easily came free. It was a kind of crystal I'd never seen before.

Futagami peeked over my shoulder to get a closer look. I pocketed the crystal and stood up.

"Shall we go, then?"

1

"Wanna go for a swim?" Megumi asked out of the blue.

"Huh?"

"In the sea. It *is* Christmas."

Go to the sea for Christmas? Yeah, Niraikanai was an island in the south, but it still didn't seem right.

"I don't think so."

"Come on. Besides, I promised to go with my sister and some other people. They told me to bring you along."

And that's how I was roped into going to the beach. The sand was hot enough to burn and the annoying, salty breeze batted against my face. Since I wasn't that good at swimming, anyway, I just sat on my fold-

ing chair under a big beach umbrella and started painting. I was working on the painting from before, the scene with the girl standing on the shore from behind. I'd wanted to get the right feel for my waves, so maybe this wasn't so bad after all.

Just when I was getting into it, Megumi came back from her swim.

"Are you still working on that? What is it, anyway?"

"Don't worry about it, it's nothing."

I didn't like people looking at my paintings before they were done.

"Well, then, I could model for you." Megumi struck a pose in her swimsuit. It wasn't sexy at all.

"I'll pass, thanks."

"Why you!" Megumi, now a little pissed, tried to take my sketchbook. As I wrestled with her, the front of my wind parka came undone and she saw my birthmark. My trauma.

Megumi stopped struggling, and gazed at it with an expressionless face.

"What's that? Are those in fashion where you're from?"

This was the first time in my whole life anyone had said something like that when they saw my birthmark. She actually thought people would want to have something like this?

"I've always had it."

"A Mongol spot?"

Huh? Is she talking about a Mongolian spot? That's a mark on a baby's butt! But the way she'd made it sound normal was nice. She must have guessed it bothered me, so she said something silly on purpose.

Section 2: Shitow Haruka

There were Megumi and Ayato-kun, playing like kittens. Being young must be nice. As for me, I was sitting on the beach with my laptop, working. I felt like a novelist right before a deadline.

"Ms. Haruka, what are you doing there, all busy?" Kim asked with a puzzled expression. She sunbathed nearby.

"Just a little unfinished work."

"Aren't you off-duty today?" Megumi asked, surprised.

"I am off-duty. That's why I can have fun here like this."

"That's ... not having fun," Ayato pointed out. What Ayato-kun said was true. I was working on data from the U-06's exploration. If the results of this analysis were accurate....

A familiar voice spoke from behind me.

"Hey, nice weather, isn't it?" It was Itsuki-kun. "Tomorrow night I'm having a little party at my house."

"Academics must have lots of free time." His presence always brought out the sarcasm in me.

"You really have some nerve throwing a Christmas party at a time like this."

"It's also to celebrate your transfer here."

"You don't need to celebrate for me."

"Don't be so difficult."

His voice was kind, as usual. But it couldn't move me anymore.

"It's good for everyone to enjoy themselves now and then. Besides, a lot of people are coming from the Operations Division, like

Gomi-kun and Yagumo-kun."

When she heard Yagumo-kun's name, Megumi seemed delighted.

"Really? Then I'm going, too!" It was so obvious she was after Yagumo-kun. But I didn't think he was the nice guy he seemed to be. I would have to have a sister-to-sister talk with her soon.

"Then you'll come as well, Haruka, right?"

"All right. If I have to go...."

"I knew you'd agree. Well then, I'll see all of you tomorrow at seven."

He really seemed happy.

Section 3: Nanamori Sayoko

He really seemed happy. When he'd invited me, I'd counted on it being just the two of us, but before I knew it, it had become this huge party. Why did he have to call all these people from Research and Operations? He especially didn't need to invite Haruka.

Humph. What was with this guy in front of me? Why did he have to drive so slow? I slid the shift lever forward, hammered the engine, and passed him. But in front of him was a big truck. It wasn't my day. I honked the horn a few times, but the truck didn't notice. It just plodded slowly along, oblivious to my frustration.

By the time I reached Dr. Itsuki's place, the sky was already overcast and the air was a little cool. I just wanted to say "Ha!" to everyone still trying to have fun at the beach.

"Um, you know...." started Dr. Itsuki, who'd been silent all the

way back from the beach. He hesitated, like he was having a hard time saying something.

"What is it?" I asked sharply.

"I know it's early, but ... here, just a little Christmas present, my dear."

Really? For me? I couldn't believe my eyes, but it really was there, hanging from his fingertips: a beautiful pendant with a blue jewel. We'd worked together for all these years, but he'd never given me anything. My hard, shriveled heart slowly began to soften.

"I've never seen anything like this stone ... it must've cost a lot."

"I just wanted to say thanks for all of your hard work."

I could feel his smell enveloping me as he carefully wrapped his arms around my shoulders to fasten the chain.

I was so happy to be alive.

I felt the slight weight of the pendant on my neck. This was the weight of his feelings. It was the best present I'd ever gotten. I toyed with the gem in it and wondered what it was. I had never seen this kind of stone before. It was a transparent blue, but deep in the center was a faint glimmer. With just a slight movement of my finger, it sparkled brilliantly.

I was happy, so happy that my chest hurt. Looking up, I saw the dull overcast sky hanging low.

"Doctor ... look."

Snow flurries danced softly down from the sky.

2

Just when I noticed it was getting cold, there was snow. It seemed impossible. A moment ago it had been warm enough to swim, and now it was snowing? Megumi put on a windbreaker and started making a big deal of it.

"Snow! It's snow!" It was a bit much. She tried to catch it with her hands, and opened her mouth to get snow with her tongue. "So cold! So this is snow...."

"You've never seen snow?"

"Yeah. I mean, since I came here I haven't been off the island," she said with her lips curled in a pout. Of course she really hadn't seen snow before. If you were from here, you would have never seen snow. For me, it was the same sort of culture shock as never having seen the sea before.

"This is the first time in recorded history that this island's had snow," Kim said, looking up at the sky.

"I wonder if it'll stick."

"I doubt it."

For once, Megumi--seeming to lack confidence--didn't jump at my contradiction of what she said.

"Yeah. If only it would have snowed tomorrow, on Christmas Eve."

She shouldn't count on that. Even in Tokyo, I never saw a white Christmas. Right now, we had to get back home. *We'll catch a cold in this weather*, I thought, and punctuated it with a sneeze.

Section 4: Isshiki Makoto

In the shot bar, without a hunter on, it was rather cold.

"Hot rum," a man ordered as he sat on the stool next to me. His hot rum came and steam poured into the cold room in its wake.

"I would've never thought I'd be ordering this so far south.... To Christ's birthday, cheers! Oops, I'm celebrating a little early."

I hated low-class men.

"You know, Christmas originally came from a pagan celebration of the winter solstice. According to legend, Mithra, the Sun God, died on the winter solstice and was reborn three days later, so the Mithraists would hold a celebration on that day. The Christians took that holiday for their messiah's birthday."

"I believe it was established as official dogma at the Council of Nicaea in 325," he said, and I realized there was more to this man than met the eye. He might make a good partner after all.

Outside the window, snow was falling. It shrouded both the road and people on it in white. White was a good color. It neither dirtied nor corrupted anything. It was just itself. I liked snow.

The white must have reminded him of something, because just then the man said something rather odd.

"When I was a kid, my uncle, who was a fisherman, told me he saw a white whale once. Then he suddenly said, 'This is for you,' and gave me his best knife."

There was a moment of silence, only broken by the sound of him sipping the hot rum.

"Then, the next time he went out on a fishing run, that was it ... he must've known before he went that he was going to die. What do you think?"

The story of the old man who knew it was his time to die, and went off to do just that. The story of the man he entrusted with his treasure. In other words, this man was trying to tell me he was someone I could trust. But it was useless. I didn't trust anyone. I could only trust myself. I learned that was how it was back on that island. So now, I would use you as best as I could, Futagami-kun.

3

Achoo!

I awoke with my own sneeze. Cold. It was too cold in here. The warmth of summer from yesterday was now replaced with a cold so bitter that it chilled me to the bone, even wrapped up to my head in blankets. And if I got out of bed, I'd have nothing to wear. I hadn't taken anything with me from Tokyo, so all I had was summer clothes. When I had looked all I found was the billowy gown in which Butchi had been wrapped in the suitcase. Ick. But beggars can't be choosers. It was the only long-sleeved thing I had.

I put on everything I had with the billowy gown on top, and just as I was finishing I heard the crunching of footsteps on snow outside. Who could possibly be out for a jog this early?

Going out to peek out the front door, I saw it was Ms. Haruka. She had just finished and was bending over to catch her breath with her hands on her thighs. Her labored breathing came out in puffs of white in

the cold.

"Wow, do you really need to train so hard?"

"Why ... do you ... think I'm out here?" She panted in between words and gave me a disgusted look. "And what's up with the outfit?"

"Hey, this is all I had to wear. I don't have any warm clothes."

She didn't have to grounds to look at me like I was an idiot. This wasn't a fashion statement or anything. Then Ms. Haruka's expression suddenly grew simultaneously happy and embarrassed, as if she'd just remembered something.

"Wait a sec."

Wait a sec? So I had to stand here, in the cold, looking like this?

What's up with that Ms. Haruka?!

At length, she came back and put out her hands to give me something, with the same embarrassed expression on her face.

"Here, take these," she said and offered me a pair of gloves. They were men's gloves, but with a feminine clover pattern embroidered on them. Were they handmade? If so, was Ms. Haruka was into knitting like a little girl?

"Thanks. But, what's up with these?" I asked, but she just giggled and didn't answer. The only thing I could tell was that she was really happy.

Section 5: Kunugi Jin

"From the U-06's report, it looks like we may have missed our chance." Director Watari seemed casual, but his voice had a hint of urgency.

"We can't be sure."

"Will everything be OK on Christmas Day?"

Many of the Operations staff had taken the day off. His question meant, 'Will we be able to handle it if the restored Dolem attacks at that time?'

"There should be no problem with that shift's crew," I said, looking at the snow outside the window. What if this strange weather was being caused by a Dolem....

"Looks like we'll have a white Christmas.... Come to think of it, I hear Itsuki's holding a party." The director remember it upon seeing the snow.

"It has nothing to do with me."

Cheerful places didn't suit me very well. I'd lost the only place that fit me fifteen years ago....

"But more to the point, aren't you going to at least go and meet him?"

My words struck the director on the back and fell silently to the floor.

He knew who it was he had to meet without my saying it. He didn't answer.... Was it OK to leave it like this? I didn't know, because I was a man who'd lost his place fifteen years ago.

Section 6: Kim Hotal

It was a strange, having snow on Niraikanai. Even on a southern island there was snow sometimes, she supposed.

Everyone in Kanai city had umbrellas out and looked upward.

The snow was strange for everyone.

"Wow, it's really going to be a white Christmas," said Megu, the one person who could be simply happy about the snow despite the cold.

"Maybe we'll see a white tree! This is the first time I've left footprints in snow. It's neat. It sounds like squeak, squeak! It sounds like you're squeezing a bag of flour." At that, she fell down hard.

"Are you all right, Megu?"

"Owww!" She grimaced, and held the present she'd just bought tightly to her chest.

"You know, those heels are a little high. You're going to hurt yourself," I said as I helped her up. She stood with a sullen expression and her face cast downward.

"My sister...."

"Hmm?"

"When my sister was my age, she was already pretty tall, right?"

Her face seemed sad, as she stretched up, trying to seem taller. Being an only child, I couldn't understand, but I figured sisters were very conscious of everything about each other, even if their ages were far apart. Especially younger sisters.

I could hear Haruka's words to me the day before Megu arrived at Terra in the back of my head.

"Tomorrow, my little sister's arriving, so I'd like you to take care of her. She's had some problems ... she was bullied at school and then just stopped going. So could you be nice to her for me?"

Haruka thought of Megu as her cute little sister, but I wondered what Megu thought.

"Are you going to get Haruka a present?"

"Why bother?" Megu asked with a laugh.

It made me a little sad.

We were getting kind of hungry, so we went to a hamburger joint. I'd just bought presents, so I had to go easy on the spending.

"Megu, you really don't like your sister that much, do you?" With her, you couldn't beat around the bush, so I went straight to the point.

"I don't hate her or anything. My sister ... she seems perfect, but she can act silly like a little girl sometimes, too."

Silly? That was about the least apt way to describe Haruka. Maybe it was because, unlike Megu, she did play the part of being perfect.

"I think there was a boy she liked a long time ago. She's never been able to get over him, so she keeps a present she wanted to give him in her dresser."

Oh, really? I would've never guessed it.

"I mean, we've moved around a lot, and she's gotten rid of most of her old stuff, but that was the one thing she couldn't get rid of. Silly, huh? She still hasn't graduated from being a girl."

She laughed at that moment, showing that she was the one who still hadn't graduated into adulthood. The feelings Haruka hadn't been able to express long ago, she now entrusted to a present she would try to give. Who were they for? I still couldn't imagine. It was something else I didn't know. But if I watched Megu, I would be able to figure it out. I would have to ask, if just to check for myself.

"Megu, um...." I said as she stood up with a start.

Outside the window, Sou-chan walked by with an umbrella up.
Oh, man.

"Wait!" Megu called out--like he had any chance of hearing her --grabbed her present, and flew outside. *Wait a sec. What about your umbrella? And your coat?* I grabbed her things and followed after her.

"Please, this is for you." Megu stood there, trying her best to make sure her feelings came across. Sou-chan seemed more than a little surprised. What was I doing here at a time like this?

"Thanks. Can I open it?"

I wondered how he would take it. Oh, man, now he was opening the wrapping. He opened the box ... inside was a necktie with a feminine four-leaf clover pattern embroidered on it. That wasn't exactly Sou-chan's kind of thing, but he looked at it and burst out....

"Wow, it's just what I wanted."

How could he say that?

"Um, are you....," she stammered, "are you coming to Dr. Kisaragi's party tonight?"

"I was planning on it. You're coming, too, right?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'll see you there!"

"Yes!" The tone of her second "yes" was high pitched; the false hope of a young girl. Was it OK for Sou-chan to lead her on like this? He had said all of that with me there, too. At a time like this, I had no idea what he was thinking, and it made me uneasy. But he just waved goodbye with a smile and went off. The only thing left was my lingering unease.

"Mr. Yagumo probably likes my sister," said Megu.

Huh? She said that unexpectedly. Maybe, like some sort of sixth sense, she'd been able to see through his words and detect the lie. But she still couldn't totally see the truth.

"I don't know...." I had to tell her the truth. I couldn't let her have false hope. But I ended up saying, "I doubt it."

It was dishonest of me. I said that because I didn't want to see the expression of hurt on her face. Because I didn't want to hurt her, and lying was the only way I could avoid it.

"If I were just a little more like my sister...."

"Megu, you and Haruka are really a lot alike. Like how you feel and your mannerisms."

I couldn't blame Sou-chan anymore. I was the same as him. I'd given her false hope. It wasn't because I'd kept it a secret. I'd missed my chance to tell her and the situation had just gotten worse. Delaying her realization would only make the hurt worse. Man, this sucked ... really sucked. I should have spoken with Sou-chan and decided on how to deal with this.

But because we had never spoken about it, we were both being dishonest with her.

Section 7: Nanamori Sayoko

"The piece of the D1 we struck last week still hasn't lost its molecular unity. Not at all."

"No, it hasn't," Dr. Itsuki said, confirming Commander Kunugi's statement.

"Which means there is a high probability that a functioning unit is hidden somewhere nearby."

"This is truly an interesting case. Up until now, the Dolem the Rahxephon destroyed lost their molecular unity and all that remained after the battle were mere lumps of clay. But this time, the U-06 has confirmed from trace imprints on the ocean floor that the Dolem has moved, though just a single piece of it. Perhaps with a case like this, if we can analyze the details, we will be able to discover the principles by which they exist."

"You can analyze data later. For now the complete destruction of the D1 must take priority," Haruka interjected. Wasn't she being a little high and mighty, especially considering she had only just gotten the commission as Information Officer in the Operations Division?

"That goes without saying, Captain Shitow," Dr. Itsuki said, and gave her a meaningful look. She answered him with a hard stare. No, that wasn't it. She was truly concerned. Just watching her got my temper flaring enough that I needed to go cool down.

I met Haruka again by the vending machines. I didn't want to see her.

"Well, leave it to you to handle things well, even in a new section," I said, my voice dripping with sarcasm, but it had no effect.

"I guess it's easy to get worked up when there's someone at work you care about."

What the hell? I couldn't believe she could just admit it like that. I felt a pang in my chest.

"Oh, I see ... is this a new thing?"

"No, not at all."

"I see."

"Someone I know?" I tried to ask calmly, and had to resist the urge to grab her by the collar and squeeze an answer out of her. It was Dr. Itsuki. It had to be.

"That's a secret."

For a secret, she wasn't being very secretive. I knew, after all. I'd figured it out that he was who she liked. That was why she was so determined. That's why she acted antagonistic toward him in public. It was all a part of their little play.

"Wow, that's a nice pendant," she said, her eyes falling on the present Dr. Itsuki had given me. No! I wouldn't let her have it. He'd given it to me ... he'd put it on me himself.

I grasped the jewel tightly in my hand and it felt cold, cold enough to freeze my fingertips.

I sat by the window with her. I wondered how I could calmly sit here like this. But no, I wasn't calm. My heart had frozen and my thoughts were cold. Even she sat silently, at a loss for words. But she was the bad one, because she'd stolen Dr. Itsuki's heart. He'd been in my heart forever. I loved him so much, it was almost as if I'd loved him since before I was born. I wouldn't let her have him. I wouldn't let Dr. Itsuki go. *He's mine, and only mine.* I wouldn't let anyone else have a hold on his heart.

"Lt. Shitow, report to the Command Center immediately."

She stood with a saved-by-the-bell look on her face.

"Well, see you at the party tonight!"

At the party tonight ... what was she planning? *Is she gonna try*

to seduce him in her drunkenness? I wouldn't let her, ever. *He's mine ... only mine.* I wouldn't let anyone else have him.

I repeated those words in my head, over and over again. The tears in my heart turned cold and crystallized like frozen water.

He's mine ... only mine. I wouldn't let anyone else lay a finger on his heart.

I would ruin it all.

Section 8: Kisaragi Itsuki

It was his usual medical exam. There were no symptoms of change. He was still like me, but that would change soon enough. I saw him on the monitoring system, the Mark of Xephon sliced into his stomach.

There was the sound of the door opening, and the director came in. I nodded at him in greeting and returned to the monitor. He still couldn't look at me directly. It was too awkward. The director looked at the Mark of Xephon on the monitor and let out a faint sigh.

"We may have caused him a lot of suffering with that mark."

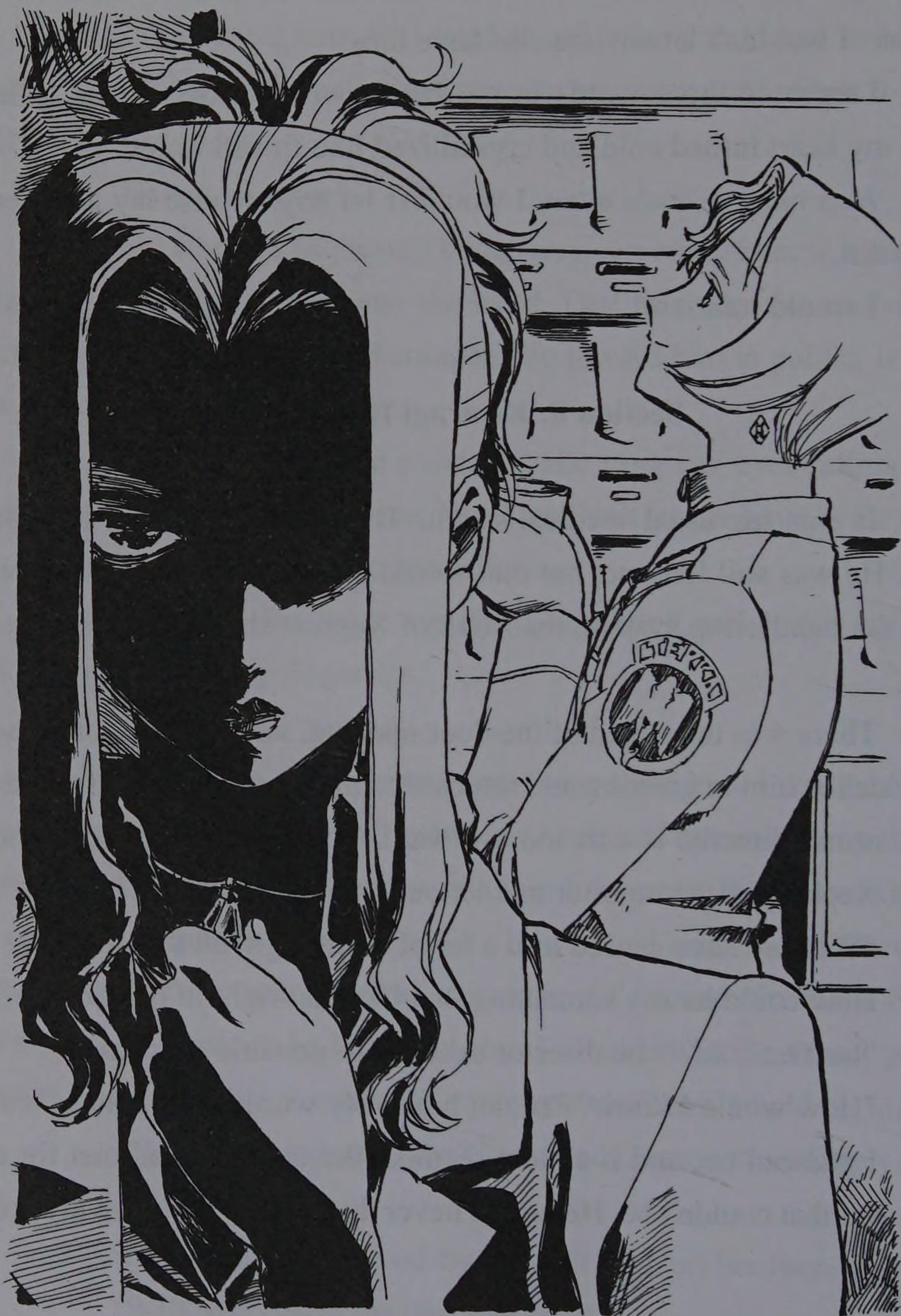
How could he say something that like that right in front of me?

"Isn't he cold?" the director asked with genuine concern.

"How would I know? I'm not him." My words were cold as ice.

I glanced up, and it almost seemed like our eyes had met for a second. But that couldn't be. He would never direct his warm gaze toward me.

The director's visit had disturbed me so much that I couldn't



focus enough to make sense of the numbers on the exam results. Meaningless numbers entered my mind, went off far away, and then disappeared. I tried to get a grip on them as I walked down the hall, but they just slipped through my fingers.

Man, it's cold, I thought, then suddenly noticed the snow.

No matter how upset I was, I knew I couldn't be hallucinating. Looking up the flight of stairs at the end of the hall, I saw snow fluttering in little by little. But, this was indoors!

It couldn't be! I flew up the stairs as fast as I could. Ms. Nanamori was standing there inside the dancing flurries of snow. The windows were all closed tight, and it seemed like the snow was forming in the air around her.

"I try to do a good job ... why are you so cruel? I didn't do anything wrong.... I didn't do anything wrong...."

Her words spun around like the flakes of snow that formed in the air.

"Ms. Nanamori?" When I spoke, she turned to face me. Her eyes were full of sadness.

"It's because you never treated me with warmth...." There was the pendant hanging resting her chest. The blue stone had grown larger than before! I hadn't realized it when I'd given it to her, but now I knew that it was the body of the Dolem.

"Ms. Nanamori, get rid of that necklace!" I shouted as the window behind her shattered and a violent gust of snow blew in.

"Sayoko!"

"My father and my brother ... would never forgive me...." She spun away from me, toward the outside, toward the sky.

"Sayoko!" I raced to the window, crying out. By then she was already gone, standing on the frozen water far below. The rays of ice she emitted froze everything: water, trees, the road, buildings; everything was covered with an layer of icy crystals.

What was happening?!

4

Achoo!

It was cold in here. The Rahxephon's cockpit didn't have heating. Man, it sucked, being called out at a time like this, and having Kunugi tell me to be quick about it. The only one anyone wanted to see on Christmas was Santa Claus, not a Dolem. I would try to take care of it quickly, though I'd have more fun taking care of that blowhard.

On the monitor, I saw the Dolem. It was shaped like a tree of ice. I would smash it. I had to. Just as I raised the Rahxephon's fist, I noticed the Dolem's face. Something was embedded in the ice on its forehead. It was....

Seizing my moment of hesitation, the Dolem howled.

The convergence of energy from the D1 aria slammed into the Rahxephon. It took all I had to put up my shield in time. It was buffeted by a tremendous impact.

"What're you doing, stupid! Hit it back!" Megumi's shrill voice pierced my eardrums.

"I can't! If I do, she'll die."

"Die? What the heck are you talking about?"

Couldn't they see her?

"The Dolem has taken Ms. Sayoko."

Yeah, there was no mistake, it was her, alright. The small piece embedded in its forehead was Ms. Sayoko.

Knowing that I couldn't attack back, it hit me with multiple beams that I was barely able to deflect.

"If I take it down, Ms. Sayoko could get caught in the blast." I was trying my hardest to explain, but I only got a cold, calculating answer from Kunugi.

"The complete destruction of the D1 takes priority, even over rescuing her."

"What?! Do you know what you're saying?"

"Saving lives is not Terra's business. However, if you still wish to save Ms. Nanamori, perhaps you can just work a miracle."

Fuck you, I thought. Didn't he care at all? He wanted me to just kill her? I was so enraged, that I took a direct hit.

It was a huge impact. Not only that. It was ...chilling.

An intense cold seeped into the cockpit like it had been pierced. The arms of the Rahxephon started to ice over. And then its whole body started to freeze.

Cold. It's so cold, Ms. Haruka. It's too cold here.

The Rahxephon couldn't move. No matter how much I tried, I couldn't even move a finger. It was entirely encased in ice.

Cold.

It got so cold that my body shook until my teeth rattled. They say it's a natural defense mechanism, that the body does that to warm up, but I didn't feel any warmer. It was so cold I could feel the pain of it crawl up my back. I couldn't feel my fingertips. I could clench and unclench my

hands just a second ago, but now I couldn't move them at all. It was like a clump of ice was surrounding my wrists and hands.

Silence.

I could no longer hear the voices from the Command Center. They probably couldn't hear mine either.

I was going to die. And I never really got to thank Ms. Haruka for the gloves....

Cold.

Suddenly, I couldn't even feel the cold anymore.

I regained consciousness and opened my eyes, feeling like my name had been called. I wondered how long I'd been out.

Immediately, the cold rushed in to squeeze me again. It was so cold.

Then, my fingers suddenly felt warmer again. *No way.* I should be in pain after being so cold, a sharp, slicing pain. *I must have been hallucinating,* I thought as I opened my eyes. I saw that I was wearing gloves.

The gloves Ms. Haruka had given me.

It was impossible. I'd left them behind. But they were so warm, it was like she was there, holding my hands. It felt the same as the warmth of her hands wrapped around me when we had just left Tokyo.

A pure, gentle sound lingered in the air, and a ripple went through the water in the cockpit below me.

The Rahxephon was free.



Section 9: Nanamori Sayoko

This....

What?...

Light?

No! No!

The winged giant, Rahxephon. I hated it. It would hurt me.
It had broken free from the ice, and was trying to hurt me.

No! I don't want to be hurt!

I shrieked, and my voice became sharp like a sword.

But the Rahxephon blocked it. So it could hurt me.

Why?

Why do I have to get hurt? I just want to be happy. Doesn't everyone? Why did they have to pick on me?

No!

It hurt. The Rahxephon was hurting me.

Ayato was hurting me. He was just a child. Just a stupid brat!

What right did he have to do this?

The Rahxephon's blade carved out my body. It hollowed out my soul.

Pain. Pain. Pain. Pain. Pain. Pain. PAIN. PAIN!

Stop. STOP!

Then, a blade of light pierced my heart. I saw my father and brother's shadows in the light. They were speaking to me.

I'm sorry.

I had done it for everyone. That's what I believed. I mean, that's

what he told me. That it was for everyone. For my father and brother. I had to do it, for the sake of everyone's happiness. Then it had all gone wrong. *Forgive me, please. I'm sorry, so sorry. Please, don't look at me like that. Not with those kind eyes.*

Being watched, looked at with such kindness, I....

I cried.

"Welcome back," I heard Dr. Itsuki say as if far away. Why was I lying in bed? This was ... a hospital room?

"You don't remember, do you?"

Remember? What had happened? The last thing I remembered was the meeting with Director Kunugi and Haruka, and then ... then I was lying here.

"Did I have an anemic reaction?"

"Well ... something like that," he said, smiling gently. Seeing his smile, I reflexively put my hand to my chest. It was gone! What could I do?

"The pendant you gave me...."

"You weren't wearing it when they brought you in."

It couldn't be ... he'd just given it to me. It was the first time he'd given me anything. I couldn't believe I'd lost it. My heart clenched painfully in my chest.

"Don't cry," he said softly.

"But, you gave it to me, and it was important to me...."

"Don't worry about it," he said, very calmly. Why was he being so kind? Because I'd passed out? I looked him over. I noticed he was dressed differently than usual. He was in a nice suit. Noticing my gaze,

he looked down at his clothing.

"It's for the party."

Oh, yeah. The party was tonight. I tried to get up, but I didn't have any strength.

"No, you must rest."

But I'd bought that dress especially for tonight. Was it all a waste?

"I'm really sorry, but tonight you have to rest," he said in a slightly stern tone, and patted me kindly on the head. I could feel the warmth of Dr. Itsuki's skin for a second, but it didn't make me any less sad. It wouldn't stop my tears.

I'd lost my present, and I wouldn't be able to show off my dress. What had I done to deserve this? Why did this have to happen to me?

When he left, I pulled up the covers and cried. I cried until I couldn't speak.

Section 10: Yagumo Souichi

The party was a great success. Tons of people from both Operations and Research came, and the host, Mr. Itsuki, was constantly busy. The food was good, as was the alcohol. There were no complaints. But despite all that, Kim was in a somber mood, and asked me to join her on the terrace outside. The aftereffects of the Dolem could still be felt through the cold bite in the air. There was some half-melted snow remaining, so it still felt like Christmas.

"So that's Meg's present?" Kim's asked, her eyes on the necktie. "How can you even wear that?"

Why? Because she had just given it to me the other day and it would be rude if I didn't. Why did she have to be so critical of me?

"Why the stern face? It's a party, Kim ... you should try to have some fun."

Just then the door opened and Megumi came out. Kim's face seemed to get even more cross. I wondered why.

"Merry Christmas, Megumi-chan."

"Me-Merry Christmas," she stuttered, all smiles.

"That's a cute dress."

"You think so?"

"Yeah, it looks really good on you."

"Thank you. I'm glad you like it.... Oh, you're wearing the tie."

"I decided I might as well try it on. How is it?"

"Just perfect for you.... But does that mean I'm complimenting my own fashion sense?"

"Possibly."

"I'm just happy you like it."

She was kind of cute, shyly smiling like that. Glancing at Kim, I saw a frightening look pass over her face as she watched us. What was up with her today? She could try to talk with Megumi-chan, at least a little.

Section 11: Shitow Haruka

I was feeling a little drunk, so I sat down on the sofa to catch my breath. I still had paperwork to finish, but I was glad I had come.

"Hey, you having a good time?" Itsuki-kun asked, finding a

moment in his rounds to talk to me.

"I am. You are a great host. Always the perfect gentleman."

"I'm pleased to hear that coming from you. But even compliments won't get you a present."

There was a smiling Santa Claus ornament hanging on the tree nearby.

"Hey, Itsuki-kun, how old were you when you stopped believing in Santa?"

"Santa? I never believed in him," he answered with a hurt look on his face. Did I say something wrong?

"How about you?" he asked.

"Me?"

It was my turn to feel hurt. It was Christmas, fifteen years ago. There was a present I'd been determined to give to somebody. But I had to move very suddenly. That's when I knew there wasn't a Santa Claus. If he really existed, he would've performed a miracle and let us meet again.

"OK, I have to get back to my rounds. There's still a lot left to drink, so help yourself. And if you're too drunk to make it home, you can always stay here."

"That line won't work on me!" I laughed and raised my glass. Through it, I saw Ayato-kun approaching.

"Ms. Haruka."

"Ayato-kun, good work today. I got news that the D1's activities have completely stopped. Jeez, I'm sorry. I tried to come here to forget about work, but I guess I can't." He gave me a small smile.

"You know, I was really worried about you. When the Rahxephon was completely stopped and we couldn't make contact, I

thought we'd lost you."

"Sorry if I worried you. Oh, wait a sec ... here," he said, taking the gloves from his pocket. I could feel my chest tighten.

"Thanks. They were very warm."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Even in the Rahxephon."

"You took them inside with you?"

"Uh, no. It's not like that. I can't explain, but they did come in handy."

"You don't have to give them back."

"I know. But they're hand-made, and I thought they might be important to you."

"It's OK. I'm sure they're happy to have you wear them." I tried to say it casually, but I knew the warmth in my chest wasn't just the alcohol.

"OK, then. I'll think of them as a Christmas present."

He smiled and held the gloves to his chest, almost like he was hugging them.

I could feel the tears coming.

"Now, this isn't just something in exchange for the gloves....," Ayato-kun said as he rummaged around in his pocket. He produced a small package. It was wrinkled, like he'd been fidgeting with it in his pocket. It was just like him to do that.

"I wanted to get you something nice, but there was the Dolem, and then I didn't have much time, then this was all I could think of...."

I opened it, and inside was a little bottle of liqueur. I laughed. He probably thought I was a big lush.

Just then, Quon, who'd been playing the piano, changed tunes. It was "The Fate of Ka'Tun."

Why? Why did she choose that song? As the notes poured out, my memories came rushing back. I was overwhelmed by their strength. No. I didn't want her to play that now. The notes were tearing me apart.

"Wait a sec...." Ayato-kun was looking at Quon with an odd expression on his face. "I've heard this before...."

My chest ached with sadness and happiness intertwined.

"I can't remember where or when, but I know I've heard it somewhere...."

You have heard this before. That day, that place.

Now I knew. That there really was a Santa Claus.

4th Movement: Futagami Johji's Report

Yomoda Yohei

What, fifteen years ago, today? What was I doing that day? I'll have to think about it. Sorry, was that a bad joke?

No one could forget that day. December 29th, 2012, the day of the Great Mu War's first thrust.

But it's not like I want to remember. What's that? This is for a feature article? They want to run an article about the living voices of Terra's employees? Could you keep me anonymous?

That day, I wasn't any place special. To put it one way, I was crossing the oceans of the web. Yeah, I was a brat kid hacker. No, I didn't play any pranks, spreading viruses or crashing mainframes--not my style. I was more the quiet type, analyzing a system's defenses and stuff like that. Hell, I was even asked to join the UNSA. Oh, but not back then. They wanted me to join up when I was in college.

Hey, do you know how the Internet came along?

Like, it was back in the 1950s, one of the products of the Cold War. You know, back then the telephone network was made of a central key station, where lines got sent out to substations, then they were divided further and sent out to each house. To put it simply, it was a pyramid structure.

But if they nuked it and got the key station, what do you think would happen to the network? Even if everything around it was OK, it would still shut down phone lines to all the high-level facilities. The army

didn't want that. And wireless transmissions could only handle a limited amount of data. They'd be left holding a bunch of useless phones and all it would take was the loss of the key station.

So, that's what the Internet was. Listen, if you wanted to call a place a certain distance from point A to point B, the relay points were fixed, like station C, station D, and so on. If a single relay point, like station C, is destroyed, you can't make a call, see? So they decided to stop using that system.

So, it's like, if they lose C station, they reroute it through F station and the call can make it to B. So it was changed from a pyramid structure to a web design. With a web, even if you lose a ton of points, you can reroute and detour through other places that are still up and you can still get through. It's like tracing paths through a puzzle with multiple routes.

What? Am I going on too long about the Internet? Sorry. So it's like that, the Internet we have is still fine even if a certain place is destroyed. Even if all of America or Japan disappeared.

But back to that day, then. The whole Internet crashed, as I'm sure you remember.

Everyone talks about Mulians, and the Dolem and all, but I have a different, more realistic theory what the main cause of death on that day was.

I was online that day. It got cut all at once. I didn't have a fucking clue what happened. At first I figured it was a problem with my server or my computer, but I slowly saw it was the whole net that had gone down.

It freaked me out. We'd lost the whole basis of our society.

It's hard to even express the feeling of complete isolation I had. How can I put it? It's like I didn't even know where I was. Like I reached out to the guy sitting next to me but my hands didn't go that far. It was like that.

Sure, it did come back online in three days, but it wasn't the same. Most everyone I knew died, and they were mostly people I'd met online, so I didn't even know their real names or what they looked like. So I guess even now I don't have a good grasp of it. Sometimes I see the same nickname of somebody online that I knew back then, and I swear my heart skips a beat every time.

After the war was over, I wandered all over the world. But only online, of course. Before I realized it really, I was working here.

What? Is Terra's net safe? Now I want you to keep this off the record, but they say the safety technology in it's all from the Babhem Foundation, so it's safe. I don't really buy it, but so far--even when we've had a Dolem attack--there've been no crashes.

Shitow Megumi

Uh, I'll take a parfait. Excuse me, one chocolate parfait, puh-leeze.

Did you just ask what was I doing on the day of the big attack in the war? Hey, old man, in case you didn't notice, I was born after the war.

So you want me to just tell you what I think about it all?

I don't get all the details, but it's like, the evil Mulians invaded us, right? So fighting is a given for me. I think everyone's like that.

I mean, I lost my dad to them. I never knew him, I only know

what he looks like from one photo.

If I say it doesn't make me sad, sure, that's not exactly true. But I'm used to it.

Sorry. I guess my interview was a waste of time, since it won't help with your story.

Can I still eat the parfait? Thanks.

Mister, I think you should lose the 5 o'clock shadow.

Donny Wong

You want to know why my code name's Tonpu? It's a long story, but if you want to hear it, I can tell you.

My Chinese name is Wong Tong Chun. My grandfather knew a lot about classical works, you see. Me? I don't have a clue.

Anyway, he took the name Tong Chun from a line of the famous Chinese poet Du Fu's poem, "The Battle of the Red Cliff." I only vaguely remember it, but it's a poem about Cao Cao of the warring states period, and that if the east wind hadn't blown, he wouldn't have had to retreat. So that's where I got the nickname Tonpu, which means east wind.

So, you want to know about the day of the invasion? I'm sorry, but I was so little I barely remember anything. The chaos afterwards is a little easier to remember.

A group of refugees came from Japan to my town, and there was a huge panic. The whole situation brought back memories of the Japanese occupation during WWII, and some people belligerently insisted that we not help Japan, but there were others who said Japan's economic recovery was necessary for the recovery of all of Asia. And a lot of the Chinese

refugees from Japan were of that belief, so we had a ton of inner conflicts.

Deeper in the continent there was the uprising, and it threatened to spread to my area, which was terrible. That's why I joined up with the Earth Federation forces. No, I didn't want to fight, but no matter how much you toss around the idea that fighting is wrong, people still do it. I now believe that a certain level of military might is a necessity.

And since Terra is an anti-Mu organization, one could just call it a way of strengthening ourselves. So that sounds like a government line? Ha ha, I'm just tellin' it like it is.

As for the others? I've known Elvy, the Squad Leader, and everyone else since we were in the academy. Back then, the Maestro--I mean, Lt. Shapplin--was our instructor. He was a tough one. It was like training, more training, study, study, then even more training, all the time.

I think he was also working his hardest. I'm sure he was just irritated that despite the common threat of the Mu, bickering countries continued their inner conflicts.

After the academy, we all went our separate ways in the Earth Federation, and have only just been reunited. Yes, we are all good friends.

Yagumo Souichi

The day the Mu Great War started? I was too young to remember. Sorry I couldn't be of any help. I'm a little busy now, so I'll excuse myself.

Kim Hotal

That day....

I was at my relatives' house in Tottori Prefecture. Not like it was an evacuation point; that place had troubles before the Great Mu War.

My parents were abroad on business. They'd left me with my relatives for a two-week period. Where were they? They were in Sydney, which was destroyed on the first day of the Great Mu War.

Sorry, I didn't mean to cry like this.

No, it's OK. I have to tell someone sometime.

That's right. It was terrible. My parents had just died, and now my aunts would always talk about how so-and-so's plant was operating at full steam so I should go there, or how such-and-such in Hong Kong could take care of me; they were always trying to find someone to pawn me off on. That's right. They talked like that right in front of me.

No, they weren't bad people, they just didn't have time to deal with a little kid like me. On some level, I'm grateful for how they took care of me. I know, my gratitude seems shallow. But that kind of thing happened all over after the war, people being passed around by family members. I'm not the only one, you know.

Of all my family members, I'm most thankful for my sister Che. She was always the one to cover for me, the one who was always nice to me. Yes, we still meet up sometimes.

Sydney?

I might go there someday, to see the place where my parents died. I've only recently been able to think like that.

You're clever. Yes, I do have a boyfriend. I know it's selfish for me to use that to decide to visit the place where my parents died.

I also didn't really intend to join up with Terra, but I do think on some level it had to do with a desire to get revenge for my parents' death.

And it was the only group that could go up against the Mu back then.

Kisaragi Itsuki

That day?

(Pause.)

No, it's just that a lot of things were going on in my life then.

(Another pause.)

I'd just met up with my father again. Yeah. I'd lived in something like an orphanage up 'til then. Friends? I had a few. We've all gone our separate ways now. The orphanage was not like a school, a place full of fun memories where you have reunions.

(Long pause.)

For me, my father had an unusual place in my world. I grew up in an orphanage, so none of my friends had fathers either. He seemed vaguely unreal to me--at the level of a king or a queen you'd hear about in a fairy tale. It was only when I got older and first started studying biology that I had the realization that I must have parents, too. But....

You know the story of Hansel and Gretel, right? When I was young I loved that story, and I had a picture book of it that I read 'til the pages fell out. Maybe it was because of that book that I convinced myself that I'd be happy if I could only meet up with my father. In the story, after

he takes care of the old witch, they go home and the wicked stepmother is gone, and they live happily ever after, just the three of them.

But my life wasn't like that.

(Long pause.)

That's right. I went by the name Kisaragi after that. My father did meet up with me, but I still don't know if he accepted me as his son. He was a very busy man.

My mother?... I don't want to talk about her. I've already talked about too much personal information. We were going to talk about that day, right? I will never forget what happened. After all, I heard the Dolem sing again that day.

Hmm? Did I say "again" just now? Maybe you didn't hear me right. Of course it was the first time I'd heard it.

The first D1 aria I heard was a thing of beauty.

Is that strange? Calling the thing that had caused the most carnage in history beautiful? If you ask me, I think that not thinking it's beautiful is more strange. If we put aside the brutality, there is no other melody as beautiful. It is completely perfect, like no melody on this Earth.

In an instant, it opened my heart. It became the deciding factor in my life. If not for that, I wouldn't have gotten into acoustics, and I most certainly wouldn't be here now.

Sorry, I can't discuss the results of my analysis of D1 arias. It would be a violation of my confidentiality agreement.

My sister? Oh, you mean Quon? I didn't live with her before. She was taken to a different institution back then. That's right. We only met up again after the Great War.

But the two of us will most likely never live happily ever after,

like Hansel and Gretel did.

Kisaragi Quon

Rara?

Jean-Patrick Shapplin

Do you know Richard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*? It's a fantastic opera with the final battle of the gods, Ragnarok, as its theme. Right when the Great Mu War started, I thought of that opera. Ragnarok, I believed, had indeed started. The end of the world. Like we were experiencing Armageddon. Humans, since long ago, have been convinced that the end will come. That was my own feeling. I'd just entered into the Canadian Air Force, and still had my youthful dreams.

My aspiration had been to become a conductor. I wouldn't think that would be that surprising. I had been in the graduate program at the Springfield Music Institute. I loved Wagner. I still think his operas are some of the finest creations of humankind. They are cathedrals made of music. A cathedral is made by three generations of craftsmen. The first plans it, the second builds it, and the third completes it. There's a perfect example in the news recently, you know, how they plan to start working on the Temple of Sagrada Familia again? Great works normally take many people to construct, but Wagner made his all by himself. But of course, an unplayed opera isn't truly complete. To put it another way, it is people like me who are the third generation artisans of these cathedrals. The first makes the plans, and it is our duty to complete the paths the sec-

ond generation lays out. That is exactly what the conductor does.

Sorry, I'm kind of off in my own world. But you know, there's a lot of racism in the music world. Even now most conductors are white, and most of the positions are held by men. In the last century, Wagner's works were used extensively by the Nazis. There are even some bigwigs who don't like a black man behind the conductor's stand. And unfortunately, because of production costs, these are some of the same people you need to look to for support when putting on an opera.

But I guess that's all an excuse. I've found the limits of my abilities. You probably think the conductor's baton is light, right? But it isn't. It's as massive as a sailing vessel, for someone who's found the limit of their abilities.

So I'm a pilot. I don't worry about the difference, because they're both the same thing to me. The grandeur of music and the greatness of the sky are in harmony.

Even still, I worried for a long time if I'd made the right choice. But my worries ended in a heartbeat with the Great Mu War. I knew then that I'd made the right choice, that the life of a pilot was the best possible course for me.

My acquaintances? Many of them perished. They were all fine pilots.

Watari Shirow

Sorry, but I'm a little busy at the moment. I must attend a meeting of the Board of Directors of the Earth Federation's Anti-Mu Committee. I have no time for questions. I have an Akafuku mochi-rice

cake left, would you like it? I see. That's too bad.

Elvy Hadhiyat

What I remember most is the light. It was the middle of the night, a flash of light shot past, and for an instant you could see the mountains and the town illuminated in the darkness. Next was the sound. I know they're called D1 arias now, but back then I didn't know anything. I sat crying, terrified in the arms of my brother and my parents.

The world had gone crazy. That's all I could think. The chaos in Indonesia was terrible.

So what's wrong with my expression? Am I supposed to remember that and have a good laugh? There isn't anyone who can just wipe the memories of that day away.

Let's leave the interview at that. I don't want to talk about it.

Kamina Ayato

December 29th, 2012? I was in junior high then. I'll never forget that day. Seeing the first images of the destruction of Osaka....

Hmm? What do you mean I'm too young?

Oh, I mean, that is ... I'm just joking around, you know? Sorry.

Ha ha ha ha.

Gomi Masaru

Yes, my father had business to do, and I was with him in Boston. Yes, I saw the fall of America. You are aware of the two traditions in America, of isolationists and internationalists? The former position declares America shouldn't interfere with world events, and the latter that thinks America should step in to make real changes in world affairs.

With the losses--or should I say annihilation--of US forces in the first stages of fighting, the isolationists gained strength. We'd made a pre-emptive strike, and as a result, the Mulians had begun their attack. So they said we needed to live on as America. We possessed fertile lands; that was their reasoning.

I know the collapse of the net played a big part in the collapse of the economy, but I think the military's defeat was the main thing behind it. I know it's bad to make examples, but it was like the best student in class failing his exams and not getting into college. The whole country felt like it had failed. The comparison to the Vietnam War doesn't work either. We didn't slip slowly into the quagmire of depression, this time it all came crashing down at once.

Of course, I was young, so I didn't completely understand what was going on. I do remember the seething confusion in the city. There were groups of blacks and whites all over, holding up signs in protests, and they were all glaring at me ... because I was from the country where they thought the Mulians had come from.

But what was really sad ... I had a friend named Emily who lived next door. We always played together. But after that day, we never

played together again. It eventually got to where she'd run away when she saw me. And it hurt more since I was young and didn't understand.

By the time of the second United States Civil War, I was back in Japan, so I didn't see the things that happened after that. And what happened wasn't a surprise, you know? I mean, of course the South would become more vocal as a result of isolationist policies--they're America's breadbasket. Some of them still had a grudge from losing the first war. When you've lived in the U.S., you get so you can just feel it all.

Come to think of it, I wonder how Emily is doing....

Cathy MacMahon

This is really a waste of time, you know. People can't just live in the past forever. You have to be forward-looking. You were making fun of me because I'm American, just now, weren't you? No, you were. I can tell.

The MacMahon family wasn't on the Mayflower or anything, but we were some of the first immigrants. We can trace our roots all the way back to Ireland.

Hmm? You can trace yours back to Seiwa Genji? Who's that? Oh, way, way before America was a country? I guess you got me beat....

Nanamori Sayoko

I was in Kyoto, so I remember the attack on Osaka. Yeah, the first one.

The ground didn't shake or anything, there was only a silent

wind. It was during breakfast.

I was living in an institute then. Yes, because my mom and dad had died right before the start of the war. I know there really wasn't any wind then, but I swear I felt it. I think everyone in Kyoto and Kobe felt it. All my friends at the institute said they'd felt it as well.

When I turned on the TV after that, I saw the brutality of what had happened in Osaka. To Osaka? Yeah, I went three years ago. But I was surprised, even though I'd known it was being remade into the new capital of Japan. I mean, on TV it had been just a huge gaping hole. I saw how great we Japanese could be when I went there.

Living in the chaos after the war, it was all I could manage as a child just to stay alive. The institute wasn't exactly luxurious, and we didn't have enough to eat. We had to steal from the fields every day. I'm still thankful for the aid China and Korea gave us.

That's right, I went to college on a recovery grant. After that I got a nomination from the head instructor, went to grad school, and was hired by Terra. Since then, I've lived quietly, working here in the lab.

I know it might not be the right thing to say, but sometimes I think people who have lost their relatives in the Great Mu War must be happy. I mean, it's true, because they have the Mulians as a focal point for their hatred. There's nothing like that for someone who lost their relatives in an accident. Back then, I only could think "if only this" or "if I'd just done that," and I ended up blaming myself.

Postscript: Attempted contact with Shitow Haruka and Kunugi Jin but was unable to secure interviews with either. - Futagami Johji

5th Movement: Sonata of Reminiscence

Kunugi Jin 1

March 20th.

I wish I didn't have to live through that day. That's what I had been thinking for the past fifteen years. But the calendar ticks off time day by day, and this day always comes. Time is a cruel thing.

"Good morning, sir," said Souichi in his friendly way.

"Morning. Any changes?"

"Nothing special. The Mu have been silent for a while. There was a backlog of mail in Administration, so I got it before I came today."

"Thanks." I took the bundle of letters from him. Most of them would be boring bits of information, but one envelope was an unusual color. I knew what it was before I opened it. It was from Mariko.

Souichi lazily watched Michiru in the birdcage. He'd taken care of her for me while I was out at Earth Federation, so it seemed she had grown attached to him as well. When she saw his face, she twittered energetically.

"It would be nice if the peace would last," Souichi said to me, or maybe to Michiru.

"You know it won't, Souichi."

"I know. Sorry."

I tried to be as casual as I could as I slipped the letter from Mariko into my pocket and stood up.

"Will you be leaving the office now, sir?"

"Yes. I'll be out for the day, so take care of everything for me."

"Yes, sir, leave it to me," he said, and turned back to the birdcage. "Mr. Kunugi, we should try to find Michiru-chan a mate. She's getting to that age, you know."

His casual words pounded through my skull and sliced into my chest. His words indicted me for my sins.

When I got on the cable car, there was already another passenger sitting there. It was Director Watari.

"Hey," I raised my hand in greeting, and got his usual wry smile in reply. But there was a sense of kindness behind his usual attitude. The director's deference was out of respect for me, because he knew what today meant to me.

The cable car slowly headed down the sloped surface of the Headquarters Building.

"I was just heading out also. Going to the ... what was that ... the Mu...." He trailed off.

"You mean the Mu War Joint Memorial Service Preparation Meeting, sir?" I said.

"Yes, that's the one. That title's a mouthful."

"So you all meet and talk and everyone feels like they've accomplished something, I imagine."

"Especially the power players. But, excuse me for bothering you with that. I hope you have a peaceful day."

"Thank you, sir."

The director gave me a sideways glance.

"Which of us is better off, I wonder."

"Hmm?" I said with raised eyebrows.

"You or me, I mean."

"We're both equally unhappy, sir."

"You're probably right. Both unhappy."

It was more than likely that if he'd asked anyone else the same question, they wouldn't have had a clue as to what he was talking about. But I knew. The director and I, we were both unhappy. Whether we lived, or died....

We rode on in silence as the cable car descended.

Prometheus, who had given fire to mankind, was chained to a rock for his sin, and every day he would have his liver pecked out by an eagle. His blood flowed and screams rang out, but Prometheus was a god and therefore, immortal. The next day would come and his wounds would be healed, only to be pecked by the eagle again.

I, who had given fire to mankind, got a letter for my sin like this every year. Though I knew the contents would be sharper than an eagle's beak, I sliced open the envelope. And I played back the media clip inside.

Her smile appeared on the screen. The youthful beauty of it was gut-wrenching.

"Every day, every single day, I struggle with the music, but I get to spend time playing the violin and I love it, so I'm so fulfilled. I'm sad sometimes because I don't get to see you, Dad, but I was so happy when I heard you could be at my next concert. I have a present for you. I know you'll like it. So you have to come. I'm looking forward to seeing you there."

I never made it to that New Year's concert because it never hap-

pened. I reached out a finger to touch her smile on the screen but all I could feel was the cold glass of the monitor.

I wanted to smash through the screen so I could touch her lips.

I would never be whole again.

This was my sin. If I'd ever been complete, it had been only once. Only when I'd been by her side.

The replay stopped and the screen was like a sandstorm. If only a person's life could end just like that, that would be true happiness. If only I could replay my life, do it over again, how happy I would be.

But my thoughts wouldn't reach. And this was my punishment.

1

While at the Command Center, Mr. Itsuki had called me, so I decided to drop by his house as soon as possible. Megumi came along.

"Why are you here, exactly?"

"Because Mr. Yagumo asked me to show you how to get here."

"Like I said, I've been here before so I can find it alone."

"Well, he asked me to do it. I guess I'm here to make sure you don't take your sweet time about it."

"That's more like *you*! I wouldn't waste everyone's time."

"When have you ever seen me lounging around? Tell me the exact time, date, month, and year!"

"You sound like a little kid."

I rang the doorbell. We bickered for a bit longer, and were interrupted when Mr. Itsuki opened the door and chuckled.

"You two seem to be having a nice time together."

"No way!"

Ugh, we had both said that simultaneously.

"Come in. I have something interesting to show you."

He led us into the living room and showed me a bunch of flowers brilliantly in bloom. They looked kind of like carnations, but I wasn't sure what they were.

"This is the interesting thing you had to show me?" I was a little disappointed.

"They're very pretty flowers. I like them a lot," said Megumi.

"I don't think anyone cares if you like them or not," I replied.

"OK, OK, no need for a lover's quarrel."

"It's not that!"

Once again, we had spoke in unison.

"Can you believe those flowers are the same as these."

Next to the beautiful flowers was a bowl with scrubby-looking flowers that appeared to never have received care or treatment.

"No, I can't."

Her saying that was understandable. They didn't even have the same shape, color, or smell of the healthy flowers. OK, maybe the shapes of the leaves were similar, but not the number. The scrubby one had brown, flaky leaves, but the other was ripe with green, vibrant foliage.

"For the past month I've used a recording of Quon playing the violin and played it for those," he said, pointing to the unhealthy plants. He then gestured towards the healthy plant. "I didn't play anything for the other group."

It sounded like something I'd heard about how cows that were made to listen to Mozart gave more milk.

"And the real reason I brought you here was to listen to that recording. Then I want to hear your honest opinion about it."

"I don't know that much about music."

"No, that's not true, Ayato-kun. You are able to control the Rahxephon like you do, so you must certainly be able to understand the essence of music."

"What does the Rahxephon have to do with music?"

Mr. Itsuki didn't answer, but got to work readying a set of headphones.

"I already asked Quon, but she doesn't seem to be consciously aware of what she's playing. So I'd like your help."

I put on the headphones and he played the recording. So this was what Quon played. The notes she played floated like ripples into my chest. The sound was of scraping on metal, but, like Quon herself, there was something elusive about it. It was harsh and yet soft at the same time. Soft, and sad.

"Did you feel something?" I heard Mr. Itsuki ask. Yeah, something in the music resembled his voice. The feel of it. But that wasn't too surprising. They were brother and sister, after all.

But to answer his question, what I'd felt ... it was hard to put into words.

"There's something ... different."

"Different?"

"Yeah ... as I listen, I feel myself getting more and more sad...."

The melody was melancholy. But something in it--how could I say this right--something in it had an edge.

"Something's ... missing. Yes. Something about it doesn't feel

right."

"Missing, I see...."

How could I describe it? I couldn't find the right words. Listening to the melody, words appeared before me, but they disappeared before I could grasp them. As I thought about that, a strange feeling came to me. I'd thought my sensitivity to music was normal, so it was odd that I could feel such fine details.

"Quon wrote this piece?"

"That I don't know."

"I don't know if it's the melody or the way she plays it, but it reminds me of the sadness a child who's lost his parents might feel, but it's somehow twisted."

What I had said was very abstract, but I saw his eyebrows lower when I said it. For a second, his eyes shone with coldness. Before I could even think of why, his expression was back to normal. My eyes must have been playing tricks on me.

"Thank you. You've been a big help," he said, taking the headphones off of me. I might have imagined it, but it seemed like he put a little more force than necessary into the motion, like he was ripping them off. That's what I thought, anyway.

Kamina Maya 1

Tokyo continued to transform itself. It was because we'd had to open the Air Circuit, but even still, the conditions we had tried to maintain from before were simply no longer necessary. The Yo Meseta Pukay had been strengthened, along with the union with the Mu. The day would

soon come when Tokyo was no longer Tokyo anymore.

I returned home for the first time in a while. It was strange calling a simple container designed so I could live with Ayato my home, but it was hard to break a seventeen-year habit. It didn't feel at all out of place calling it that.

"I'm home," I said as I stepped in the front door, knowing there was no one to respond. Though it'd been a while since anyone had been inside, the air seemed odd, twisted. It was probably just because it had been shut up for a while, but there was a strong stench in the air. The faint stench of the withered plant in the entryway wafted past me. I saw the hall was covered with a layer of dust. There wasn't really any need to keep up this place. No, there was. Because Ayato would come back. He would come here, to take back his life and live with me.

I went upstairs to Ayato's room. Immediately I could smell the unique odor of a boy, like a young animal. The room that had lost its master was now left stagnant, to vacantly watch time go by.

The poster of a young celebrity hung on the wall; his desk with resource books haphazardly stacked upon it; the bed with his blankets left in a heap from when he had last slept there; the stereo I had given him for his thirteenth birthday; his media storage rack; a bookcase filled with manga and reference books. All of it was exactly like he had left it that day.

Then there was his easel which held a half-finished painting, a scene depicting a young girl standing on the edge of a cliff. The odd backdrop beyond her seemed to represent a fear of growing up. It was an unconscious fear, to be sure. I remembered something from a long time ago and a smile crept across my face.

When I was seventeen, I saw a dream that looked a lot like this painting. It felt like I saw it every night.

I couldn't paint, so I'd etched the scene into my mind. And now, Ayato was painting with a real brush, the scene from my dream. We really were mother and child.

Back then, I was living a very ordinary life. It all changed when I turned seventeen. For Ayato, everything had also changed when he turned seventeen. Every single thing.

Perhaps he wasn't my son anymore. That didn't matter. That was destiny, the destiny of the world because I had chosen to awaken him that day.

His room was really messy. When I reached down and grabbed his blanket to make his bed, Ayato's smell rose up and gripped me.

Seventeen years.

It was a long time to be concerned with a single person. Even more so to do that as mother and child. His smell wafting up from the bedding brought with it memories. The smell of the hospital the first time I saw him, the smell of his head as an infant, the smell of his leather backpack from elementary school. The pungent smell that had begun to hang in his room when he'd entered junior high.

My cheek was wet. Are they tears? I couldn't believe I could be affected by such human sentiments. It was just a natural human reaction from being emotionally unstable caused by fatigue.

Even still, the tears kept coming. I cried for that time spent, the seventeen long years.

But my thoughts weren't enough, they wouldn't reach ... no, I would make them reach. They had to. Because the fate of the world

depended on these thoughts.

2

After leaving Mr. Itsuki's house, there was only one place to go: Kanai City. Megumi had gotten him to give her some flowers and needed to buy a vase to put them in. And she'd pestered me long enough with the litany of "you can't let a young lady travel alone," that I ended up going along. How, exactly, did she get off calling herself a young lady?

"Ayato, what's your mom like?"

"What's this all of a sudden? Why do you want to know?"

"You know, because Mother's Day's pretty soon."

"That's in May. It's still March."

"I don't know, I guess looking at these flowers made me think...."

They did look kind of like carnations.

"I never liked Mother's Day. You know, because my mom got remarried and all that. I could never get myself to just say thanks to her."

Mom.... I wondered what she was doing. Enough time had passed that I wasn't even sure if what I'd seen--the blue blood on her cheek-- had really happened.

"Well, what's she like?"

"My mother? Well...." I had called her Mom in front of Ms. Haruka, but for some reason, using the word "Mother" with Megumi just seemed right.

"She's kind of an unusual person. I can never tell what she's thinking. I mean, she's not a bad person or anything. I guess she was

never good at communicating with me or relatives, so she was always very formal when dealing with me."

I suddenly remembered the one time she'd taken me to Disneyland when I was young. I'd been very happy, surrounded by Mickey, Donald, and the other characters, but for a second, when I turned to look at her, she'd had this cold look on her face. All the other parents seemed to be having as much fun as their children, but not her. She detected my gaze and quickly made a smile, but I knew it was a lie.

"When I was little, I didn't think she was odd or anything. After I entered grade school, though, and went over to some of my friends' houses and saw their mothers, it surprised me to see how different mine really was. I mean, if any of them were bad, their mothers got mad or punished them."

"Yeah, that's normal."

"My mother never ever got mad. She did punish me, don't get me wrong, but she always did it in a calm, logical way. She never got emotional."

"I think that's nice. My aunt and my sister were always getting mad at me."

"But she never laughed, either." Megumi looked stricken. My mother never laughed. She never cried. She always had a silent, cold smile. I remember once--before I was even in preschool--watching TV and seeing an actor laughing with a big wide grin and not understanding what it was for. I mean, my mother, the example for me of all adults, was someone who never laughed at all.

"She has some strange characteristics ... but I always thought she was a good mother. For me, that is."

"So, do you ever ... you know, want to go back to her, in Tokyo?"

"I don't know. I want to go back, but also I don't want to. And I've gotten used to living here."

"Really?"

A silent wind blew between the two of us.

"So, what's your mother like?" I asked, and Megumi's expression grew troubled.

"My mom, I know she struggled to raise us by herself after my dad died. So, logically, I understood in my head how she wanted to be happy as a woman, not just as a mother. But my heart just didn't agree. When I heard she got remarried, I really acted like I was going to die. I mean, I thought it was unfair to my dead father."

She let out a big sigh and was silent for a while.

"Not only had he died, but she'd also forgotten him." She looked at me with eyes brimming with tears. So she was her daddy's little girl. No, that wasn't it. Hadn't someone told me she wasn't even born yet when he died in the Great Mu War?

"But you never really knew your dad, right?"

"That's right. But that doesn't mean anything," she said, her voice growing stronger. "He never knew he had a kid. He never knew me. And he didn't know my mom got remarried. I feel so bad for him."

Was that really it? I kind of got what she meant, since I'd lost my dad in an accident ... but I'd never once missed him or wished he was still around.

Well, not exactly. I'd thought that once. In one of my classes at school we were told to draw a picture of our fathers. I had run home later,

confused and in tears, and asked my mother why I didn't have a dad. I'd completely forgotten about that. So what had my mom done then?... I couldn't remember. I just remember looking through her curtain of hair, past her shoulder to see the wall. Had she hugged me?

"No matter how much I think of my dad, I know my thoughts never reach him," she said, with an aura of sadness surrounding her.

Kunugi Jin 2

I stopped by a jeweler's in the shopping center, because they'd called earlier to tell me that the watch I'd ordered was ready.

"Oh, Mr. Kunugi, we've been expecting you," the owner said, then went in the back and brought out the watch.

"How is this?"

Inside the box lay a fine lady's wristwatch. I picked it up and unclasped it. A name was engraved on the underside of the watch.

"How is this, sir?"

"That'll be fine, thanks."

Suddenly, I saw a shabby head poke through the doorway. It was Futagami.

"Wow, this is some nice stuff," he said, directing his friendly smile at me. But I wondered what was really going on in his head, beneath the smiling facade.

"Funny meeting you here. Well, actually, I was just walking down the street and saw someone that looked familiar. I thought, 'Hey, he looks just like Mr. Kunugi!' I figured it'd make a good story to tell you when I met up with the real you, but what a surprise! When I come in the

store, it turns out to be the real you after all."

Futagami spouted out this long tirade of nonsense, but I didn't buy it. To be surprised, of all things, that somebody who looked like me was really me? What a load of crap.

"This is good timing, anyway, since I was just looking for something myself."

"Mr. Kunugi, who might this be?" The owner asked politely, but with obvious disdain in his voice.

"I'm a friend of his. Let me see another watch like his."

The owner, with a tired look, showed Futagami another watch of the same model.

"Hmm, what the?... That's a lot of zeroes! One, two, three, four ... ten thousand! Holy!..."

Futagami seemed to freeze up when he realized what the price was. His stale act was like something out of a comic book, and I couldn't help but smirk. Meanwhile, I'd already had them wrap up the watch for me, and I put it in my pocket and slipped out the front door. Futagami noticed and followed me out in a hurry.

"Uh, hey, wait a sec."

Oh, that's funny. Wasn't he looking for a watch?

Section 1: Kisaragi Quon

Long ago, the violin's strings weren't metal, they were of made stretched sheep guts, and the bow was not the warped thing it is now, but was larger and made a softer sound. In Mozart's time, that soft sound rang through the halls of the royal courtesans. Now the strings were made of

metal, and the tension in the bow was stronger, so sound can come out at a higher decibel. But has the heart changed so much? Were the people of Mozart's time that much different from us? It was buried in the score. Buried in sound. Buried in the stillness of agony where nothing is made. A curse against the violin spilled over. Plop, the plopping sound ringing in my heart, will it dribble down into the spiral of a dream, or death? My finger pressing against the strings hurt. When I play for a while, the strings gouge and slide into me. Cutting, cutting, grinding into my heart, discordant. But it isn't the dissonance of reality; it is the discordance of my heart. The door opened, the one who would be my blood silently padded in.

"Quon ... have you slept any since you got home this morning?"

Slept? I slept, slept.... Don't wake a sleeping child. The wakened child gobbles the mouse. Shake, shake, flutter, and gobble the crying mouse in a dream. The mouse cries, crying, seeking forgiveness. Seeking. Loving. What is held in the swelling breast of a loving young girl? What is this illusion? I am unable to grasp the meaning, like the fine point of a sharpened knife. I was tired. Fatigued matter blocked the connection of neural synapses, and the receptor's functioning didn't go smoothly. For a second the ion exchange didn't go well.

"Something's missing."

"Hmm?"

"Something's missing. Something in it. Cut off thoughts. The wind doesn't reach ... gears not meshing ... something's missing."

Sound. Sound. Sound. I can't make sense of the meaning inside. Lost time, after wandering the world, ones with no place to hope for sink into sorrow. The smooth flow of a dream.

"It's just as I thought. Ollin said that as well."

"Ollin did?"

I rolled the name Ollin on the tip of my tongue. *Ixtli, Ollin, Yolteotl*. Multiple names joined as one, took on the meaning of seven colors, brilliantly overlapping.

"I asked. He said the same thing."

Ollin. Ollin. Ollin and Quon. Quon and Ollin. A similar sound. A similar thought. The same destiny.

"Ollin and Quon--we are similar."

Itsuki's face suddenly darkened. I understood why. A twisted connection. It was like the pole marking a barbershop, twisting red, blue, and white, overlapping, layers twisting, the pattern folding. Red and blue. Red blood and blue blood. Twisted and spun around double.

"Is Jin OK with this? OK with this sound?"

The basics of making a judgment left unclear, things were uncertain. My thoughts like a floating eggplant jellyfish. Was this OK? Could he really be happy with this sound?

"If those are her words, then surely he will choose to face her."

Thoughts don't reach. A wind that doesn't reach. Could Jin face it? Jin.... Gin was the alcohol made from distilling corn, barely, and other ingredients, then perfumed with the essence of juniper berries and other extracts. The Djinn was a male demon from the Middle East. The Jin in Japan was a fort where the military was stationed. Another meaning for Jin was dust. A cloud of sand blown on a sad wind. The sand tries to cover the sea of tears that comes out, but the sadness cannot be buried. Ah, that was it. The meaning of this Jin was dust.

Kunugi Jin 3

"Sorry about this. But thanks for helping me find something for my niece. I'm not that good at getting presents for kids," Futagami said, obviously making it all up. He now clutched a stuffed animal. If we were supposed to be shopping for his niece, then why were we in this outdoor concert hall now? He said it with the same air one would have when saying, "I don't know what you're talking about," or "I'm not wearing a wiretap."

I had some time until my appointment, so I'd decided to help him out, but for all his talk of finding a present for his niece, he mostly gingerly prodded me for information. From "So how long have you been in Terra?" to "What kind of food do you like?" His questions truly covered a wide variety of subjects. But then, I was also conducting a little investigation. From his behavior at least, I could tell the Foundation wasn't backing him. And knowing that, it meant only one possibility remained.

"Well, I'm off," I told him, testing him.

"Come on, it's early. Besides, there's still a lot of time before your departure."

So, he seemed to know my schedule fairly well. Even if the Foundation wasn't supporting him, Futagami wasn't someone to be taken lightly.

"Today Mr. Watari will be attending the Mu, um ... Mu something, something..."

"The Mu War Joint Memorial Service Preparation Meeting."

"Yeah, that's the one. He'll be attending that meeting today. But

that's beside the point. Isn't there something you should come clean about?"

In an instant, Futagami shed his dull-witted reporter persona and revealed his true skin.

"I know the Mu appeared from nowhere, but weren't the US Forces in Japan, the USFJ, destroyed only because they made a preemptive strike on the Mu? And because of that action, America's just a shadow of its former self? A real pity."

The sound of the afterburners that day came back to me. I hated that noise. He irritated me, for making me remember that.

"So?"

"In the official reports, it says it was an arbitrary act of the American military, but there are rumors that another player was involved in giving the orders. And that it was an SDF officer."

He seemed to have connected the dots quite impressively.

"But that guy seems to have dumped all of the blame on a subordinate, and disappeared without a trace. And the one who got the blame was a much better target, a certain individual who had a promising career ahead of him."

"An interesting rumor, to be honest, but after all, a rumor is just a rumor. Am I wrong?"

"Now don't get ahead of yourself. There's more where that came from. It seems that it was that subordinate who used the tactical nuke on the Mu. Of course, at the time, he didn't know it was a nuke. But that stands to reason. I mean, the SDF wasn't even supposed to have any nukes. But because of that a whole city was annihilated. How am I doing so far?"

Shit. I'd been a fool to go along with him today. I'd had no idea he knew this much. The cool wind blew through the isolated outdoor concert hall in gusts. Only the two of us were inside. A long span of time had passed before I realized it. Soon the shadows below us had grown long.

"Mr. Kunugi, you were in the SDF, if I'm not mistaken."

"A long time ago...."

That was my sin.

"You retired in 2013. I wanted to ask before, but why didn't you work on in the reorganized USDF? Instead you went to work at Terra as a Commander. Is the pay that good?"

"It's not that much...."

That was my sin.

"Really? Compared to what I get, it's pretty sweet. After all, I can only afford this cheap stuffed animal for my niece. I wonder if there's a better job I could find."

"If you're interested, I might be able to introduce you to someone."

"Whoa, you mean a position in Terra?"

"No, with the Federation."

A silence lengthened between us.

"Ha ha ha! You're a tough cookie. You've got me."

"Well, then, if you'll excuse me."

"Please, please. I've kept you too long as it is."

As I left, I wasn't sure if my legs were up to the task of supporting me. I wasn't prepared for those probing questions, especially not today.

That was my sin.

Prometheus was chained to a rock and had his liver pecked out by an eagle every day.

So where was my atonement?

Leftover Memories

"So, what's the problem?"

"Colonel! There are still civilians there that haven't been evacuated. I cannot do this."

"Don't worry. It will be a pinpoint attack on the enemy using a new type of bomb supplied by the USFJ, so the effects on surrounding residents will be kept to a minimum."

"But there will still be some damage!"

"You are a soldier! An order from your superior is absolute!"

Though I was a fool to do so, I followed that order.

3

We were walking along, making some idle chitchat, when I heard someone call out to me from behind.

"Going on a date after work?"

"That's not it at all!" We both looked back, upset. Standing there were Ms. Haruka and Ms. Elvy.

"Maybe we're in the way."

"You must be kidding," Megumi said quickly, brushing aside her accusation with a wave.

"Dr. Itsuki gave me some flowers so I had to buy a vase. He's just here to carry it."

"I told you not to point at me!"

When Megumi ducked, avoiding my swipe at her hand, I could smell the two women. Where had they been just now?

"You smell like barbecue and booze. Another ladies night out?"

Ms. Haruka's face got a little red. Looked like I'd hit the nail right on the head.

"So, what's the problem? I paid for it, so I can have what I want."

"Well, whatever. At least it looks like Elvy isn't drunk this time," I said without thinking. I remembered Ms. Elvy at the house that time, totally drunk, and how it had only gotten worse. She'd been rude and treated us like we were serving girls at a pub.

"Kamina Ayato," Ms. Elvy said, bringing her face close to mine.

"Let's hook up."

What? Surely she didn't mean....

"Let's dogfight!" *Damn! I should have known...*

In the end, I was dragged to an arcade.

It had been a long time since I'd played a video game. They were a lot different from the ones in Tokyo. I guess a ten-year difference in technology made for big changes. The games here were way more advanced than back then. Virtual games were all the rage here. I had a hard time just getting used to the controls on the first one. After that, Ms. Elvy and I did a dogfight on a jet fighting sim, but I didn't stand a chance. It was slaughter.

"You're not bad, kid," she said, after buying me a soda at a cor-

ner café.

"I played a lot in Tokyo."

"You know why you lost?"

"Of course. It's because I'm not used to these games yet."

"No. It's because you're a civilian and I'm a soldier. Didn't you know? Soldiers are the biggest cowards on the planet. They have an abnormal fear of death, so they fight on, only concerned about staying alive. Civilians are different. They don't see their own death, so they're unafraid. And because they aren't afraid to die, they always make a mistake."

Why was she getting all worked up over a game? What was with her?

"It's been four months. The Rahxephon is up and running again."

What was she getting at?

"Have you ever thought about the possibility that you might die?"

That ... was something I tried not to think about. But that's what it meant to fight; there was always a chance you would die. To die.... I couldn't get a feel for it, though. Almost every day there was something in the news about an accident or something where somebody died, but I'd never had any of it relate to me personally. I didn't have any relatives, so I had never even had a grandparent die.

I had never tried to see my own death.

"How long do you plan to pilot it?" Her voice had an unusual edge to it. Ms. Elvy was looking deep into my eyes. She was truly concerned about me.

"But ... would it be OK for me to?..."

Her expression turned grim. She silently drank the beer that arrived, and my unasked question floated between us.

After everything, it was actually getting late. The sun was already going down. Megumi and I trotted along the bridge to make it to the ferry landing in time.

After my conversation with Ms. Elvy, I couldn't clear my head. It looked like Megumi had been talking to Ms. Haruka (about what, I didn't ask), and she seemed kind of depressed. Megumi and her sister weren't exactly on bad terms, but they weren't friendly either. I didn't have any siblings, so I didn't know, but I guessed Megumi and Ms. Haruka's age difference must have made it more difficult. Still, a lot of their problems seemed to stem from Megumi's posturing and attitude. But, then, sometimes siblings did seem to get along, like Mr. Itsuki and Quon. Actually, they almost seemed too friendly. But maybe it was just different because they were big brother and little sister.

"Oh, the vase...." Megumi mumbled quietly. The flowers in her hand were already starting to wither. We'd come to Kanai City to get her a vase, but had completely forgotten about it.

"Wanna go back?"

"That's OK. I don't really need one...."

For no good reason, we stopped walking, right in the middle of the bridge. The salty breeze ruffled the flowers in Megumi's hand. The pier across from us cast a long shadow on the surface of the water.

"Let's go look at the boats," she said.

"Hmm?"

"Quickly!"

She suddenly grabbed my hand and took off, dragging me behind her.

"W-wait a sec!"

We ran with the wind following in our wake.

A magnificent boat was anchored at the pier she took me to. The name on the side read MARVIN PEAK.

"Wow, I can't believe they have ships like this on Niraikanai."

"Yeah, it's does a dinner cruise around the island. It's really popular."

A group of people were heading up the ramp to get on and enjoy a little tour and some luxurious dining on the *Marvin Peak*.

"It's nice. I'd love to go on a date on it sometime."

"That's a little much for just a date, I think."

"No, it's not. It would be like a dream."

"Yeah, in a dream world maybe."

"Shut up!"

She had that look again, but at least she didn't seem depressed anymore.

Section 2: Futagami Johji

While I was keeping tabs on Kunugi, I ran across an unexpected individual. It was the mark. He was with a girl. And she was, in fact, Subject Level 7, Shitow Megumi.

"What a cute couple. You two on a date?" I tried teasing just a bit, but they turned on me in a second.



"No, we aren't!" they said at the same time, looking a little pissed. If it wasn't a date, why did they seem so perfectly matched?

"What are you doing here?" asked Ayato-kun.

"I had something to do. But speaking of dates...." I glanced at the gangplank, gesturing with my eyes towards the silent stream of somber men and women boarding the *Marvin Peak*. And he was with them. Subject Level 7 noticed first.

"Hey, Mr. Kunugi!"

"Wh-what the?... So today's a special day because he has a date?"

I couldn't help but chuckle at her simple remark, such a typical little girl remark.

"Nice." I smiled. "So the commander is on a secret date, eh? But that would mean he's dating his daughter!"

"Daughter?!" she cried out in surprise.

"I didn't know Mr. Kunugi was married."

So, Kunugi wasn't open about his marriage, either.... Not that I had ever managed to find a wife myself.

"Yeah, and today's his daughter's birthday." Man, I couldn't quit! I knew I shouldn't, but I just kinda blurted it out. I always played it dirty, sticking my nose in a little too far, just to get a reaction out of people.

Level 7 looked like she'd thought of something clever, something that might not be a good idea. Wait, I wasn't gonna.... Gimme a break. *Forgive a cowardly old man*, I thought as I grabbed the present I'd intended for my special girl. Sorry, niece, but work has to come first. Wait a sec.... I didn't have a niece, anyway.

Kunugi Jin 4

The setting sun dyed the surface of the bay a golden hue. On the table was a bottle of red wine and two glasses. A faint bitter aroma hung over the white tablecloth. This year hadn't been any better than usual.

"As always, a bottle of Mouton-Rothschild cabernet sauvignon."

I slowly raised my head to look up. There she was ... Mariko. My wife was still beautiful after all this time, almost as if the fifteen years since we'd met hadn't passed. She was just like she'd been then. Though....

"It's the only kind I know," I said, using the same line I had back then.

"As if you'd even try to find another," she said, also falling back into habit. Time hadn't affected our relationship at all, it seemed. And our relationship was unchanged, frozen in place from that day forward. Encased in an icy sorrow that would never thaw.

"Have you eaten?"

"Yes, I already finished."

I waved off the server that approached, and she sat down across from me. Just then, I noticed a slight change. Her perfume. I didn't know the name, but Mariko had always used the same perfume. Now she had on something different. Oh ... so that was it.

"Are you surprised I accepted your invitation?"

"Yeah." To tell the truth, every year I assumed that she wouldn't come. I always waited for the wife who never came. So that also ended today. That was it.

"Did you watch the video?"

"Yeah."

"What did you think?"

What did she want me to say? That I watched the video she sent the way I did every year: in tears, overwhelmed by my feelings of remorse?

"Our daughter had a future. She was very talented."

I heard the sound of a violin in the back of my mind. It was my daughter's playing. It may sound like a silly parent's pride, but her playing was truly brilliant. It was beautiful enough to send shivers up your spine. Everything she wrote was also a work of art.

I had plucked off that talent.

"It is my sin."

"That's right. It is all because of you."

Even now I could clearly remember the feel of the firing button under my finger. And the flash of light that wasn't supposed to emerge. Even though I hadn't known my daughter was underneath, I still....

The sound of laughter burst into the room.

Looking over, I saw a couple with their daughter sitting diagonally ahead of me. It must have been her birthday. The three of them were happily eating dinner. They were about the same age we'd been back then. I felt a hard lump form deep in my chest. That ... that was the family I could have had if I'd only tried a little harder.

"Because of work you never had time for her ... and in the end...."

She was trying to be calm, but her voice was breaking as she rebuked me. She was also attacking herself. That day, she'd had an emergency and left the house. Mariko must have felt that if she would have at

least been nearby.... She had been haunted by that thought for the last fifteen years.

"It's exactly as you say."

She could attack me all she wanted, but I didn't want to see her hurting herself. Mariko sighed faintly and stared out the window. The reflected light of the sunset in the harbor colored her face beautifully.

"I came this time because I'm leaving Japan soon."

"I see." So that was her reason.

"I'm also changing my name."

"I see."

And she was doing that as well.

We sat in silence for a long time, just watching the sea. After a bit, Mariko slid a large envelope across the table.

"It wouldn't fit in the letter I sent, but I've finally decided to give you the last one."

Inside was a musical score.

"She said she wrote that thinking of you."

Her handwriting wasn't very pretty. It brought tears to my eyes, but I didn't cry. Because all my tears had dried up that day.

"Did you learn how to read music?"

"No, I never tried to learn."

"Oh."

A quick, sad smile crossed her face.

"This one's a quarter note, and this one's--"

"Please, your father has a lot of work to do now."

"This one's called a half note."

"I told you I have work to do!"

I thought I could quiet a child by saying I had to work. I thought I could maintain my peace in my family even when I'd forgotten our wedding anniversary by saying it was because of work. Because I was doing it for the family, for them. And this was the result. The irony was enough to make you want to laugh.

"Mister Kunugi," said the floor manager as he walked up to me. "We've been holding this for you."

He had a slightly withered bouquet and the stuffed animal. There was a card with it, written in a childish script.

"You should always have flowers ready for a girl, Commander. From your loyal followers, plus one."

The plus one was Futagami, I guessed. I see he didn't know what to do with his supposed present for his niece. The loyal follower was probably Shitow Megumi. She was the only person I could think of who would do something like this. She was still such a kid. I couldn't help but smile.

"Are you smiling?" I heard Mariko ask.

"Hmm? Yeah."

"So you've learned to smile...."

My smile froze.

"It's OK. I learned to smile some also. It seemed it took a long time for both of us, though."

"I guess so."

"Who's it from?"

"My staff seems to have been oddly concerned about me."

"Would you show it to me?"

Mariko lowered her eyes to the card.

"The flowers are for you, then?"

"I suppose so."

"You must be happy having people who would do something like this for you."

"Yeah."

"You need to make new relationships. I'm trying. I think that's for the best."

"I think you're right."

After Mariko returned the card to me, she took her bag and stood up.

"I guess I'll be going now. See you."

"Mariko...."

I didn't turn to face her. And my wife didn't turn to look at me.

"Thank you."

"Goodbye."

The years we'd spent apart suddenly seemed to pass. This was the period at the end of our sentence.

In the card she'd returned to me was a thin sheet of paper. The divorce papers!

For fifteen years, she'd refused to accept my offer for divorce, and had continued to use the Kunugi name as a way of getting at me. I didn't mind. It was my sin. But I knew she wanted to make a future for herself and wanted to be chained to my name no longer.

It seemed that she'd finally been able to make that happen. We would probably never meet again.

That was OK. I was OK with that. The chains on my heart seemed to come undone, if only a little.

I took a drink of the Mouton-Rothschild. The rich, full-flavored, yet slightly bitter, liquid slid smoothly down my throat.

It was a bottle of 2012. The year she died.

That girl's time, as well as my own, had stopped then. But this wine had slowly matured over those long years.

The whistle blew, and the *Marvin Peak* slowly started to proceed inside the golden bay.

4

With the outline of Nirai Island's mountains as a backdrop, the *Marvin Peak* glided across the golden-hued surface of the water. A black wake of shadows trailed behind it. Watching it go by, Megumi mumbled, "I hope the Commander had a nice time with his daughter."

"We didn't need to do that, you know. I hope we didn't get in the way."

"What are you talking about? Of course my plan worked! Leave a girl's feelings to another girl. I'm sure he was busy, so he didn't have time to get her flowers himself."

"Not that. I mean, there's a lot of stuff between a parent and child that strangers couldn't know."

How could we know what Mr. Kunugi and his daughter's relationship was like? I wouldn't even know what to talk about now if I met my own mother.

"Just stop!" Megumi shouted. She was getting agitated. "Shut up! Shut up! I just want to go home and eat! I'm starving!" And with that, she turned and stalked off. Seeing her acting like her usual self made me

happy.

"Hey, wait up!"

Our shadows stretched long across the pier as we walked.

Section 3: Kisaragi Itsuki

Mom.

Mommy.

Mama.

Mother.

What should I call her?

What would she let me call her?

She wouldn't let me call her any of those; the time that had passed was long and twisting. The days and years that went by changed human relationships.

I'd surpassed her in height long ago. If I'd seen her arms, arms that might have reached out to hug me, probably only tears--no words--would have come.

Thoughts that wouldn't reach.

The time that separated us.

The color of blood that separated us.

The blood's sad color.

We're supposed to be mother and child.

But, mother ... where are you now?

Section 4: Nanamori Sayoko

"Where's Itsuki?"

"He's at home, probably having dinner with Quon."

"I see. Then we have some time."

His cold, white stare traced a line up my body like a snake.

We were at the hotel bar. It was dimly lit, and the odor of alcohol intermingled with the hopes of men and women. What was I doing here?

"Is this really for Dr. Itsuki?"

This white-faced man had told me to steal a certain piece of data from the lab. According to this man, who claimed to be an inspector for Earth Federation, Dr. Itsuki was in a dangerous situation. There were concerns that he was deliberately concealing data related to the current project. And this project was considered to be one of the Earth Federation's highest-level secrets. If it was released that the person in charge of this project was concealing data, not only would he be summarily fired, he'd also be guilty of treason.

So he said we were doing this to save Dr. Itsuki.

As I was a good friend of Dr. Itsuki, I would do anything to avoid that situation, even if it went against his wishes. And if I could steal the data and properly dispose of it, then it might mean we could avoid any possibility of him losing his job.

The man's stare clung to me like frost on the side of a cold glass of vodka.

"I want you to trust me," he said.

How could I? I didn't trust mere words. Since that day, I hadn't

trusted in anyone or anything. Not since that day when I'd been seduced into believing what I'd done was for my father and brother.

I had been tricked because I was young. I was old enough now. I wouldn't be tricked so easily again.

But it was true that Dr. Itsuki was in a dangerous situation. I knew he was concealing information. And I had an idea of what would happen if it came to light. Even before this person had made his offer, I'd thought of leaking the data myself.

I hadn't because I knew he would be worse off if I did it. Then came the offer this white person proposed. I knew he wouldn't let Dr. Itsuki get in trouble. He just wanted Dr. Itsuki under his control.

It might be best if I was involved.

Section 5: Isshiki Makoto

Stupid woman. She didn't even fully grasp what was going on, and yet was trying to gain control of the situation. I placed the room key on the table between us.

"So, you want to get to know me a little better, is that it?"

What a foolish woman. With what little control she had, now she was trying to take control of me as well.

"I love an intelligent woman."

When I raised my glass, she brought hers up as well.

The clink of our glasses--a toasting of lies--resounded throughout the small bar.

She was truly a stupid woman.

Kunugi Jin 5

I climbed slowly up the slope that was illuminated by the moonlight.

At the top of the hill was the line, standing in silence.

A line of gravestones.

I walked among the dead. Like she'd promised, Quon was there waiting.

"You want to see it?"

I gave her the musical score my wife--I mean Mariko--had kept for me. Quon looked over it for a while and then slowly raised her head. The corners of her eyes glinted in the moonlight. Was she crying?

"This is good. Jin, this is very good."

Quon, were you crying for me?

"It was always, *always* missing something. But now it is complete. I can express my thoughts. The thoughts sacrificed to raging wings don't flutter at all. A time long has passed."

She raised her violin to her chin, and the first note drifted up toward the moon.

The melody my daughter had created now breathed new life for the first time; the melody celebrated its birth with the land and sky.

I kneeled down by a single gravestone and placed the bouquet Shitow had given me before it.

This grave was a lie. She wasn't buried beneath it.

She had vanished beneath the greatest flames humankind had ever created.

When I arrived at the hospital the day you were born, Mariko

was lying in bed, smiling. And you were there beside her.

I didn't think you were cute, only that your cheeks were shining just like when they say a bright shining baby. And your already-clever glance seemed to penetrate to my soul. I swore to always protect this child as long as I lived.

But even with my promise, I'd pressed the firing button.

This was my sin.

"Happy Birthday."

To me, these were words of prayer.

"I know it's lonely, but you'll have to sleep there alone for just a little bit longer. Only for a little more time.... I still have things to do. Mariko, your mother, forgave me. I won't hesitate any more."

As I knelt down, the melody gently caressed my back, along with the gentle rays of the moon's light.

Michiru....

My dearest daughter.

Kisaragi Quon

I played. For the dead daughter. My thoughts for her, she who'd longed for her father and tried to follow him, raced up towards the moon riding on the melody I played. Brilliant sound, weeping moonlight. Sounds released by my playing didn't hurt the father, but laid gentle hands upon his back. Was this healing? Or blaming? No, it was forgiveness. An evanescing, the overlapping of breath, speech, and lips. I could play with all of my thoughts in the music. The melody drifted away from my fingers as I played. But it did not go far, it only piled up on the listener's

chest. A crucifix near the gravesite. Who put up that cross? Without knowing, it was still in the form of Christ. Christ bore the sins of all mankind upon His shoulders when He was crucified. Oh, Mary, the one before. Santa Maria of the snow. One who gave up hers to provide for the scattered masses. The man kneeling there bore mankind's sins upon his back. He would receive forgiveness with his penitence. No ... he already had forgiveness. From his daughter, at least. I knew that because I was the one playing her song. Jin may not have known. Sadness billowed outward. The light of the moon shone in Jin's eyes. Was that radiance from a tear? The light of his tears glanced off the gravestones, this gathering of the dead.

Kamina Maya 2

"So, now you're trying to kill your son?" Mamoru-kun said as he arrived at the Tokyo Bay Base.

"You're going to send out another Dolem, aren't you?"

"So what? Ayato is steadily learning to play the Xephon. Things have been on hold for a while, but now the System has recovered enough. Thanks to Yo Meseta Pukay, Tokyo's synch rate is going up."

"I'm not talking about that. I want to know what you're thinking."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"The Dolem you've been sending out are getting stronger. The Xephon is also growing stronger to match them. That's not a problem. Isn't it a little cruel that they have to be sent out to die?"

Had this boy been with humans so long he'd grown weak? It was

sad that I even had to think that. Maybe his usefulness to me was running out. But that was just fine. I still had at least one use for him.

"I'm not sending them out to be killed. I'm sending them out to try to kill Ayato."

"So you *are* trying to kill him."

"The Rahxephon will never allow that."

Did he actually think the Rahxephon would allow its Instrumentalist to die? If that happened, the entire Xephon System would go wrong.

"But there *is* a chance."

"I suppose."

Mamoru-kun seemed surprised at my quick reply in his favor.

"So you think we can change the world without sacrificing your son's life?"

His cold words swung down like a knife in the Conductor's Space.

What of it? I didn't care at all about Ayato's life.

But at the same, I was proud to say that he was my beloved son.

I could offer him up to the world because I loved him so much....

Afterword

Reporting in at the end of Volume 2 of the novelization of *Rahxephon*.

This covers the material in the TV series up to Episode 10, but some of the details are different in this version.

For example, Ayato-kun has a lot more worries in the novels than in the TV version. He worries about not being able to pilot the *Rahxephon* and then about not wanting to fight.

He's only able to overcome each problem through his connections to other people in the story.

Also, sometimes Ayato-kun speaks differently to people than how he thinks.

He is a bit meeker in his spoken voice to others. I'm sure a lot of people can understand that, that how we speak when talking to friends differs greatly from how we talk to people we don't know or aren't close to.

Ayato-kun is the same way.

He's still polite, even to Megumi-chan. He keeps some distance from her, even though in their conversations they seem very close.

I wonder just when Ayato-kun is able to speak freely.

His relationship to Haruka-san is also a little different from how it is in the TV series. I'm sure it will be more clear in the next installments (I have at least started on the next issue).

And there was one case where I've omitted nearly the entire contents of a single episode. I know in future installments more things will be left out or completely changed.

I hope the fans of the TV series aren't too mad, and can understand that this is the novelization.

Also, it's possible that some of the dates differ from the TV series. I hope you can accept that it is just a difference in setting for the novels and the TV version.

Well, then, I'll be continuing this project in the 3rd and 4th volumes next, and I hope to see you all again.

--Hiroshi Ohnogi

To be continued in volume 3...



JUNK FORCE

Leave the planet and don't look back!

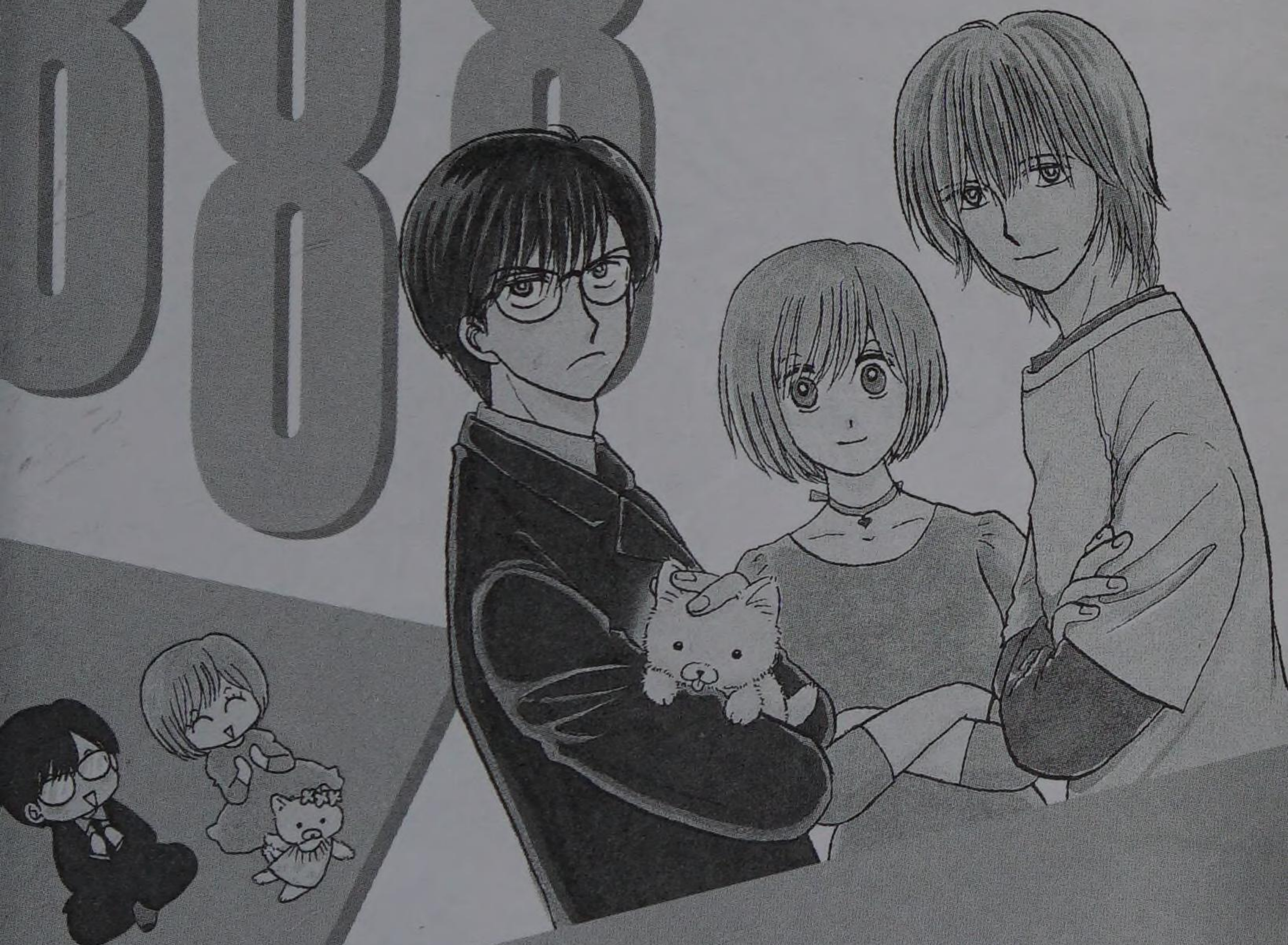
THE NOVEL



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Delve deeper into the Junk Force universe with this first novelization of the hard hitting sci/fi manga! Follow the trials and tribulations of Liza, Wooty, Mill, Mamet and Louis as they strive to defeat the Z.T.P. while fighting off Martians and their own personal deviations. It's a literary adaption that knows no bounds, fleshing out the Junk Force story with new twists and details!

KUWATA NORIKO



No work and a lot of play... 888 is a whimsical glimpse at detective life for a new Private eye agency. The problem is, detective Mori Shimeki his pet pomeranian and fellow coherts can't get a single case. Volume one consists of eight episodes of laid-back detective stories, that include Shimeki's past (his ex-wife, his long-lost brother), taking measures to increase clients, and the everyday scene at their workplace.



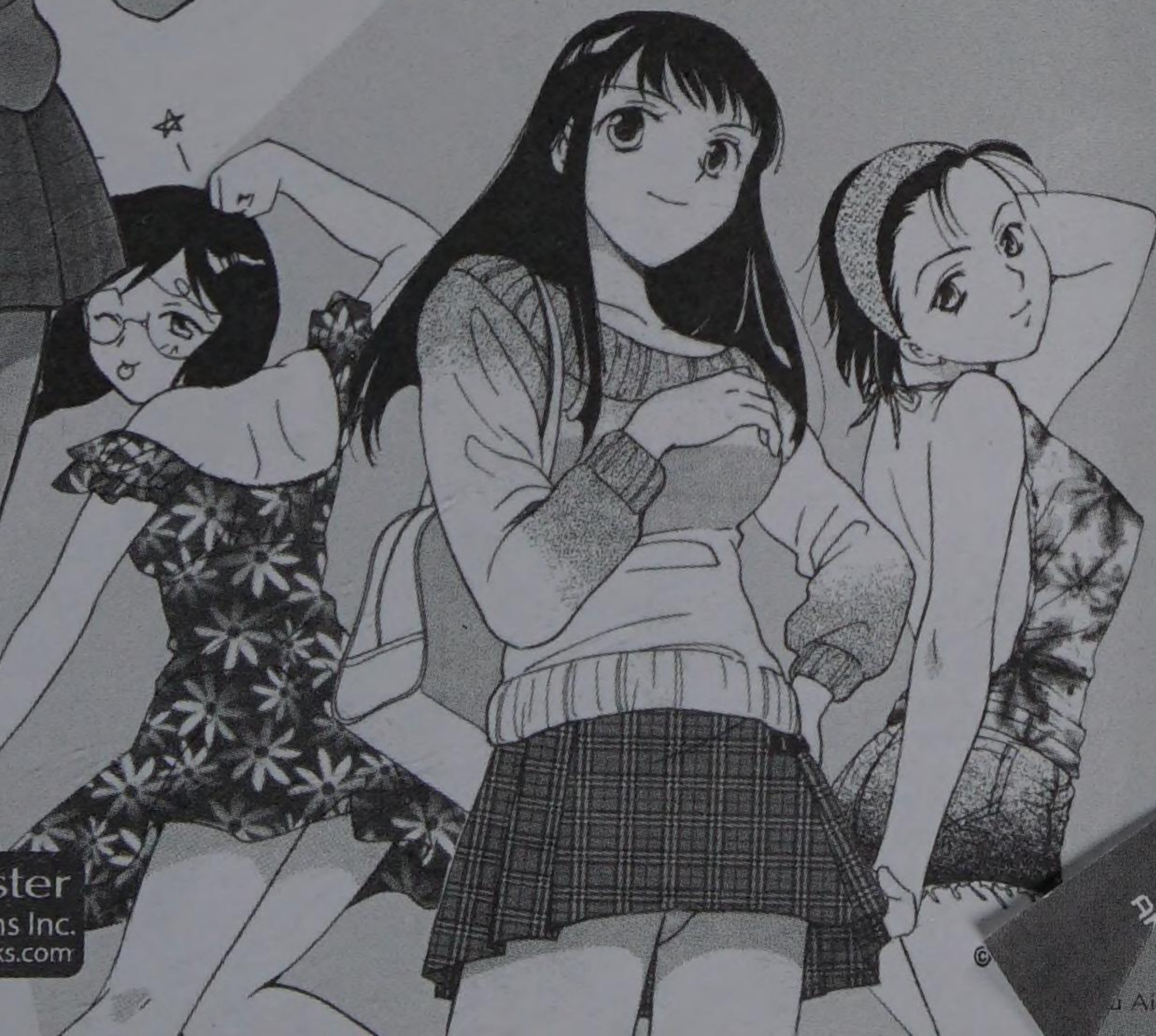
HINADORI GIRL

Mari Matsuzawa

High School Girls

By: Towa Oshima

A hilariously hip account of life at an all-girl private high school. As the student body comes of age we witness their search for love, sexual controversy and the rivalry between cliques. Based on the author's own real life experiences this is one manga you don't want to miss. If you enjoyed the drama in "Heathers" and "Clueless" you'll love High school Girls!



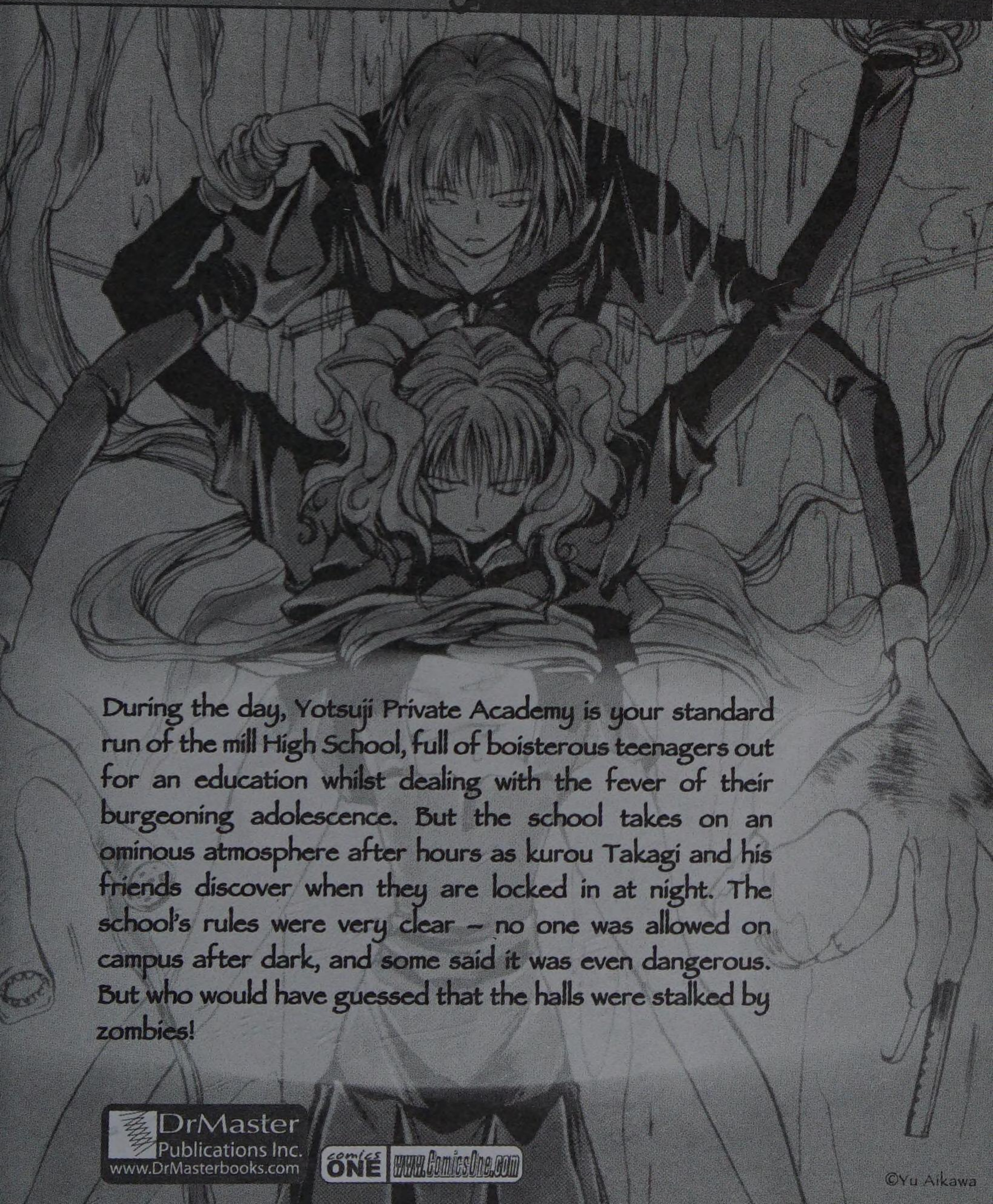
LUNAR LEGEND
TSUKIHIME

姫

BLUE BLUE GLASS MOON. UNDER THE CRIMSON RAIN.

A CHILDHOOD ACCIDENT HAS LEFT YOUNG SHIKI TOHNO WITH A VERY SPECIAL ABILITY. HE CAN NOW SEE THE HIDDEN LINES OR WEAK POINTS IN ALL THINGS -- BE THEY ORGANIC OR INANIMATE. BY STRIKING OR CUTTING ALONG THESE LINES SHIKI CAN SLICE THROUGH VIRTUALLY ANYTHING LIKE A HOT KNIFE THROUGH BUTTER. UNFORTUNATELY THE GIFT COMES PACKAGED WITH A NEARLY IRRESISTIBLE URGE TO KILL USING HIS NEW ABILITY. A YOUNG GIRL FALLS VICTIM TO SHIKI'S KILLING LUST. YET SHE IS APPARENTLY REBORN UNHARMED AND DEMANDING SHIKI'S AID. WHO IS SHE AND WHAT COULD SHE WANT?

DARK EDGE

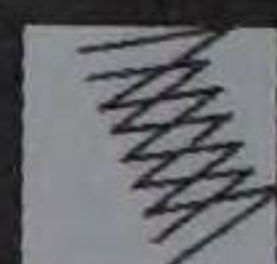


During the day, Yotsuji Private Academy is your standard run of the mill High School, full of boisterous teenagers out for an education whilst dealing with the fever of their burgeoning adolescence. But the school takes on an ominous atmosphere after hours as Kurou Takagi and his friends discover when they are locked in at night. The school's rules were very clear – no one was allowed on campus after dark, and some said it was even dangerous. But who would have guessed that the halls were stalked by zombies!

01

MANI-GIRLS
GET
AMBITIOUS!!

おねあし

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INDIAN SUMMER

KOHARU BIYORI

Set in a near future, robots are common workers for their human owners. Ready to live a life of mechanical servitude, Yui – a robot maid – has just been purchased by Takaya Murase from the robotic doll distributor, MaidWorks. However, Takaya has other plans for his new servant that don't quite include cooking and cleaning house. To her new owner, Yui is like a life-sized doll, on which he can act out his costume-dress-up fantasies. But Yui only wants to serve... Find out how this mismatched pair fares, especially once rival robot maids Minori and Ayumi enter the scene. It's subservient robotic humor at it's best.

TAKEHITO MIZUKI

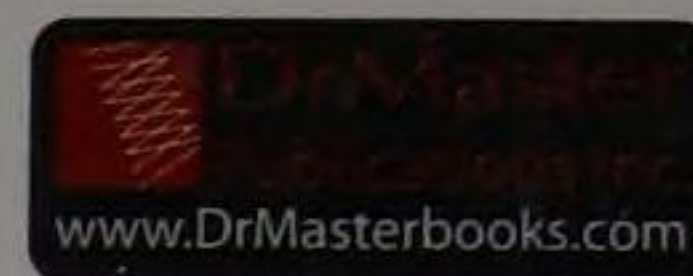


ISBN 1-59796-001-2



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Price: \$7.95 US NOVEL



Ayato Kamina is now living on the island of Niraikanai. With the mysterious reporter Futagami's exclusive report on Terra, Haruka's switch to Operations, and Elvy's transfer to Terra, Ayato's world is in constant flux.

He is troubled by his inability to pilot the RahXephon and is challenged by his own pacifism. Even his relationship with Megumi is changing....

But one day, as Christmas approaches, snow falls on the tropical southern island. Ayato stands to face a new Dolem, one that freezes everything in its path, but he can't strike—because Sayoko is trapped inside!



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